PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 316

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

**FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II**

SESSION 1997–98

**COMPRISING PERIOD
13 July–24 July 1998**

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES — VOLUME 316

TWENTY THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 1997–98

House of Commons

Monday 13 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prisons (Overcrowding)

1. **Mr. Robin Corbett** (Birmingham, Erdington): When he last visited a prison establishment to discuss overcrowding. [48393]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We visit prisons to see for ourselves what is happening and to talk to staff, prisoners and members of boards of visitors about matters of concern to them. Issues relating to overcrowding and prison population pressures are frequently raised. Since the general election last year, Ministers in my Department, including me, have made 64 visits to prison establishments, of which I have made nine, the most recent being to the Wetherby young offenders institution on 30 April.

Mr. Corbett: Does my right hon. Friend agree that putting non-violent offenders in prison is often neither the most cost-effective option nor the most effective prevention of reoffending? How will the Crime and Disorder Bill inspire public confidence in the belief that punishment in the community is both cost-effective and at least as effective as prison in preventing reoffending?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is right to point out that community punishments are significantly less expensive than prison—the average cost of imprisonment is about £25,000 a year, whereas the average cost of a probation order is £2,000. Some so-called non-violent offenders have to be incarcerated because they are persistent offenders, but we are determined to improve the effectiveness of non-custodial sentences through, for example, a national roll-out of tagging and our many reforms to the youth justice system that will ensure that much more offending is nipped in the bud.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The Home Secretary was kind enough to visit the floating facility at Portland—I think that it was his first visit as Home Secretary. What is he doing to ensure that proper training and work programmes are carried out on such emergency facilities? What is he doing about the future of temporary facilities? Will the floating facility be rebuilt, or will it remain for more than the three years that were originally intended?

Mr. Straw: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the future of HMP Weare if that is convenient. I place on record my thanks for his support for the facility, despite some public opposition, much of which, I understand, has dissolved—people have accepted that the facility is not only good, but has created 200 or 300 extra jobs. We are committed to improving prison regimes. The House may be aware that we are spending £1.5 million on a pilot to ensure that welfare-to-work facilities are available in prisons before offenders leave.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that there have been too many suicides in prison,

particularly in Preston prison. Does he believe that one reason for that is overcrowding? If so, it is essential that we solve that problem as soon as possible.

Mr. Straw: We are all profoundly concerned about the incidence of suicide in prison, which is significantly higher than in the equivalent age group outside prison. However, the number of suicides among young males is, sadly, rising in the population as a whole. I do not believe that there is evidence that overcrowding—prisoners being held two to a cell—is a cause of suicide. Indeed, many of those who are deemed to be at risk of committing suicide are put with another prisoner in the hope that the risk will be reduced. The Minister responsible for prisons, the Director General of the Prison Service and the whole of the service are taking every possible step to ensure—through counselling, for example—that the risk of suicide is reduced.

Crimes Against the Person

2. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What recent representations he has received on the level of crimes against the person in the United Kingdom. [48394]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): Not surprisingly, we regularly receive representations on the level of crimes against the person, often from Members of Parliament in relation to experience in their constituency, but as far as I am aware we have received none from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Amess: Will the Minister join me in congratulating the police and others on their efforts to detect and combat crime and in particular on their support for closed circuit television? If he will, how can it be right that, last year, Labour attacked the Conservative Government for not approving the CCTV bid in Southend, yet this year, when Southend borough council, which consists of the Labour party and its Liberal friends, put in a similar bid, the Labour Government rejected it?

Mr. Michael: As I said in my first reply, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's new-found interest in the issue. The Government have got on with the task and given the weapons to the police, in partnership with local bodies, to enable them to tackle crime and disorder, including violence against the person. I hope that they will have the hon. Gentleman's support in that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my hon. Friend join me in condemning the horrifying murders of three young children in Northern Ireland, who were done to death for no other reason than sectarianism? Will he take this opportunity to extend the sympathy of the whole House to the parents and the closest relatives of those who were murdered over the weekend? Is it not horrifying that, despite the Good Friday agreement, some people in Northern Ireland still want to use the terrible, murderous methods against innocent people, in this case young children, that were witnessed in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere? Let us condemn these terrible murders and demonstrate the fact that we are on the side of the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland, who also condemn what has occurred.

Mr. Michael: Nothing is more effective than the death of children in concentrating people's minds on the horror of violence, wherever it occurs. I certainly share my hon. Friend's view that it should give cause for thought to anyone who wants to continue the atmosphere of conflict. There is nothing in the situation of children of the ages of those who died that can possibly justify what has taken place. Everyone should pause for thought before doing anything that could encourage the continuation of such mindless violence.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I associate myself and my party entirely with what the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and the Minister said, but I want to ask about another specific area of crimes against the person: football hooliganism. Does the Minister agree that, if the world cup competition is to be staged here, we need to convince everyone that everything possible is being done to eliminate hooliganism? Will the Home Office consider setting up an independent group to investigate what improvements can be made and whether any changes will require legislation?

Mr. Michael: No one has taken more interest in that topic than my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. He has had the support of all parties in the House as well as the co-operation of the authorities in France in doing all that we can to tackle the problem and keep to a minimum any contribution that is made by English hooligans to the violence that has so disgraced us over recent months. I know that he intends to consider how to ensure that all possible measures are in place and that he wants to work with the Football Association to find the best way of making the maximum contribution, including through co-operation across the Floor of the House.

Penal System

3. **Mr. Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): If he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the penal system. [48395]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Serious, dangerous and persistent offenders should be sent to prison and should be subject to constructive regimes in a secure and well managed environment. Prison may not, however, be the most effective option for less serious offenders. Our priorities are tough punishment in custody and in the community in ways that carry public confidence and reduce offending. We are looking at options for closer and more integrated working between the Prison Service and probation services.

Mr. Wyatt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that community punishment needs the confidence of the community?

Mr. Straw: Yes.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Home Secretary agree that detection and prosecution of those who commit crimes is of paramount importance, along with deterrence? Can he assure the House that there will be the closest possible co-operation between the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts in tackling crime?

Mr. Straw: I would like to give that assurance, and to say that over the past 15 months, the Attorney-General,

the Lord Chancellor and I have worked hard to bring about closer collaboration between the police, the CPS and the courts and to set up joint planning arrangements. My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General recently published the results of the Glidewell inquiry, which should ensure major reforms in how the CPS relates to the police, including the establishment of coterminous boundaries.

Illegal Immigration (Smuggling)

4. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): What steps he is taking to tackle the international crime syndicates currently involved in smuggling illegal immigrants into the United Kingdom. [48396]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): People trafficking is getting more sophisticated, but so is the Government's response. We have set up the organised immigration crime section at the National Criminal Intelligence Service to tackle the problem. The unit targets the criminal networks involved and is helping in the development of a more proactive, intelligence-led approach to combating the problem. We are also creating better international co-operation with European and transatlantic partners. Several countries face this problem, and we need to work together on it.

Mr. Sheerman: I understand that a report from the immigration service highlights the true number of illegal immigrants entering the country and suggests that immigration has accelerated in recent years. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is galling for constituents, who may wait for years for a loved member of their family to join them, to see illegal immigrants arriving and little action being taken? Does he agree that high levels of illegal immigration spawn crime and add to the cycle of exploitation?

Mr. O'Brien: I agree with every word my hon. Friend said. Many people, particularly in ethnic minority communities, are outraged at abuse of the asylum system and illegal immigration. We are determined to tackle the people-traffickers who make vast amounts of money from illegal immigration. We will disrupt what they are doing and will prosecute wherever possible. Today, I have published a consultation paper on the appeals system, which we are trying to sort out. Shortly, we shall publish a White Paper showing how we can create a fairer, firmer and faster system of immigration control.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): No one should underestimate the Minister's difficulty in trying to make the system more effective. Is he aware that many of those who work in the immigration service are appalled at being unable to cope with the rising tide of illegal immigration and at finding themselves having to let go people whom they know to be illegal immigrants who are never again found? Does he agree that this problem should be a first charge on the Government's time? Will he do all he can to bring order to the current chaos?

Mr. O'Brien: I agree that the system that we inherited from the previous Government was a shambles. They did not put in place the resources or facilities necessary to ensure proper immigration control. We want to put them in place. That is why we have had a complete review of how the immigration and asylum system operates. We will publish the outcome soon and deliver what the Government of which the hon. Gentleman was a member never delivered—firm and fair immigration controls.

Restorative Justice

5. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What progress has been made on extending restorative justice to new police areas. [48397]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): In recent weeks I have seen work demonstrating the value of restorative justice in Northampton, Gwent and the Thames valley, which has made young offenders face up to the injury they cause others. The reparation order and other measures in the Crime and Disorder Bill, with proposals for reform of the youth court, incorporate restorative justice principles, and will lead to a major extension of restorative justice.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of research from the system operating in the Thames valley that suggests that the reoffending rate among young people with whom it deals is about 3 per cent., compared with 30 per cent. nationally. However, my hon. Friend may not be aware of the anxiety expressed by several officers participating in the scheme that, if untrained officers use this robust method of forcing young people to confront their wrongdoing, it might be damaging and lead to quite frightening results in some areas. In the face of a large expansion of the scheme, what resources will be devoted to ensuring that every police area operates the scheme as excellently as it is being operated in the Thames valley?

Mr. Michael: I agree with my hon. Friend that training and preparation are necessary. The benefits are obvious both to the victim, who often feels that he or she has been able to confront offenders with their damaging behaviour, and to young offenders, who often do not realise that they are damaging other people through their burglary, theft or car crime. We are offering guidance and support to ensure proper training and preparation locally and partnership and co-operation among a variety of organisations, not just the police.

Refugees

6. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): If he will list the proposed changes to the Dublin convention on the treatment of refugees which he has made to the European Union. [48398]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): On 29 May, member states agreed a series of measures—including a comprehensive programme of action put forward by the British presidency—designed to improve the practical operation of the Dublin convention. Our measures address

both the difficulties of establishing responsibility for asylum seekers who are undocumented and the need for better co-operation and liaison between member countries.

Mr. Wilkinson: While it is laudable that the Government have followed the excellent example of the previous Conservative Administration and extended the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987 to international train operators who run services through the channel tunnel, why have Her Majesty's Government not been able to prevail on the French—France is a signatory to the Schengen convention—to make the channel tunnel carriers' liability order apply to SNCF train services? The Belgians comply, so why not the French?

Mr. O'Brien: Some legal defects in the treaty make it difficult to extend. However, we have had discussions with the French—and received much co-operation from the French Government as a result of the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—to ensure that we reduce the number of refugees who enter the country from Paris. It is correct to say that there are practical difficulties, but we are receiving the co-operation of the French in seeking to resolve them.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The Minister chose to refer to the Government's review of asylum and immigration appeals in his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames). Can he tell us a little about the background to that review? Do the Government acknowledge the problem caused by the increased number of such cases? Does not the Government's proposed single right of appeal amount to an extension of the principle behind the so-called white list cases, which Labour opposed in opposition? Will the Minister say specifically whether, in initiating the review, the Government are paving the way for some form of general amnesty for asylum seekers?

Mr. O'Brien: The white list has little or nothing to do with the Dublin convention or the other issues that we have discussed. We have made it perfectly clear that we do not intend to have a blanket amnesty; we have given that reassurance on many occasions. However, I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the previous Government's actions in 1993, when more than 50 per cent. of exceptional leave to remain cases were granted the right to stay in a one-off process. It ill becomes the hon. Gentleman to start talking about amnesties now.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Does my hon. Friend accept that there are 10,000 outstanding cases that predate the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993? We inherited that problem, the Dublin convention and the difficulties of dealing with undocumented asylum seekers. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that he will see what he can do to deal with that backlog, so that those who have waited for years may finally receive a fair decision on their cases?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right; the Dublin convention and the pre-1993 backlog are another fine mess that the Conservatives left the country in. We will clean it up as fast as we can, but the Tories left us quite a mess.

Minimum Sentences (Burglary)

8. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): When resources will be available to implement mandatory minimum sentences for burglars convicted of a third offence as set out in section 4 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997. [48402]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): On the time scale set down by the Conservatives in government, when they passed this legislation with our support.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will he confirm that the average sentence for someone convicted of a seventh burglary is less than 20 months? Does he find that acceptable? If not, will he say why he and the Government continue to oppose mandatory minimum sentences, given that the courts refuse to use the powers at their disposal to impose long enough sentences on repeat burglars?

Mr. Michael: As usual, the hon. Gentleman constructs something to criticise while disregarding accuracy. The Government have not opposed mandatory minimum sentences; we have introduced two. He should ask why no date for implementation was set by the Conservative Government.

Mr. Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): Is not this point a bit rich coming from the Conservative party when burglary increased by more than 120 per cent. in the 18 years after 1979? It is a cardinal principle of our system that people should be subjected only to penalties that are commensurate with the circumstances of the crime, taking into account the victim's circumstances and the impact on the victim's family, for example. Should not we move away from that principle only where there are compelling circumstances, such as protection of the public?

Mr. Michael: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. It is also a bit rich for Conservative Members to squander money that they did not provide for in their period in office, with all the irresponsibility that they seem to have adopted since the general election.

Parliamentary Elections

9. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): What assessment his Department has made of the benefits of the present system of elections to the House. [48403]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): In the debate on the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, and more recently in the opposition day debate on 2 June initiated by the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), I spelled out, among other things, the benefits of the present system. The independent commission on the voting system has been established to find the most suitable alternative to the current system. The characteristics of the present system are well known to all hon. Members, many of whom spoke eloquently about them in the 2 June debate. In view of that, it would be an impertinence for my Department to provide the House with a separate assessment.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does the Home Secretary agree that at least half of hon. Members favour retaining the present

system of election to this House, that the system is both proportionate and representative, and that it is unfair that the commission under the auspices of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead does not properly represent the views of those in favour of retaining the first-past-the-post system?

Mr. Straw: I cannot speak for the exact number of right hon. and hon. Members on either side of the House who support the current system, but it is certainly quite substantial. Given his support for first past the post, the hon. Gentleman makes a grave error in asserting that the first past the post should be put to the independent commission of inquiry. We have sought an independent inquiry into the alternatives. There will be a referendum in due course whereby the British people, as they should, will themselves have the right to decide between the present system and a very specific alternative.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many of us would have far more confidence in that suggestion if it were clear that the first-past-the-post system were to be part of any referendum? I have to tell him that some of us might feel far happier if the work on the alternative system were not in the hands of someone who has always demonstrated his inability to do anything correct at any time.

Mr. Straw: I give my hon. Friend the assurance she seeks: that first past the post will be one of the clear choices on any ballot paper in a referendum on voting systems.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Is it not the case that, without the assistance of the Home Office, it is fairly easy to obtain the details of how often the present electoral system has produced results that are wildly at variance with the votes cast? As that is not one of the primary objectives of an electoral system, is it not sensible of the Government to establish a commission to determine what alternative can be put up against the present system in a referendum? Can the Home Secretary understand why some hon. Members appear to be so worried by the possibility that the British people will be able to decide whether they prefer the present system or a proportional one?

Mr. Straw: Home Office records also record the full-hearted support of the Liberal party for first past the post until 1923—when it slipped from being the second party with a prospect of power to a minority party.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there are barely a dozen Opposition Members who have the support of more than 50 per cent. of those who voted in their constituency on 1 May last year? A far higher proportion of Labour Members have the support of 50 per cent. of their electorate. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the commission will consider not only proportional representation, but other systems such as the alternative vote?

Mr. Straw: The Jenkins commission's terms of reference have been widely drawn so that it can, if it wishes, consider the alternative vote. It became clear in the debate on 2 June that there is widespread feeling on both sides of the House that if the issue of proportionality is to be properly examined, we should look not only at proportionality between votes cast and seats obtained, but at proportionality between votes cast, seats gained and power secured.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): As one of those Members of Parliament with more than 50 per cent. of the vote, let me ask the Home Secretary whether it is becoming clear that more and more sensible people now support retaining the constituency system and first past the post? Liberal opposition only underlines my point. The right hon. Gentleman has to answer why the Jenkins commission was not asked to evaluate and to put the evidence on all electoral systems, including the present one, but was asked simply to try to find alternatives to the present system. Would it not have been much better to have an evaluation of all the systems, including the present one, which we know the right hon. Gentleman supports?

Mr. Straw: We discussed that matter at great length in our debate on 2 June—

Sir Norman Fowler: And we will again.

Mr. Straw: —and we will again. However, from his position of strong support for first past the post, the right hon. Gentleman is making a grave error in suggesting that first past the post ought to go to the commission. We want—I should have thought that it would also be in his interests—the electorate to be offered a clear choice between the present system of first past the post and an alternative that will be drawn from the recommendations of the Jenkins commission. That seems to me to be the best way of—at long last—securing legitimacy either for the current system or for an alternative. All of us, whatever our point of view, ought to have confidence in the British people's ability to make the final choice.

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, when Lord Jenkins met Members of Parliament from all parties two weeks ago, both supporters and opponents of electoral reform united in agreeing the importance of a programme of public information in the run-up to a referendum? Whatever system Lord Jenkins and his colleagues come up with will require a programme of clear public information so that voters can make an informed choice in the referendum. What plans does the Home Office have to ensure that such a public information programme is organised?

Mr. Straw: I accept that there will be a need for a public information programme, but already the word of our debates on the various alternatives that are on offer for European elections has travelled so far and so fast that in the centre of Blackburn I am frequently assailed about the divisors laid down under the d'Hondt and Sainte-Lague systems.

Prisons (Drug Use)

10. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): If he will make a statement on the number of prisoners taking drugs. [48404]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): Although mandatory drug testing cannot be a complete measure of the prevalence of drug misuse in prisons, it gives the best estimate of the number of prisoners using illegal drugs. In 1997–98, 20.8 per cent. of random samples tested positive for drugs.

Mr. Flight: Does the Minister view that as a serious problem, and does he feel that there is a need for more than random sampling? What measures, if any, do the Government have to address the problem?

Mr. Howarth: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that at Ford open prison, which is in his constituency, the figure decreased from 17 per cent. in 1996–97 to 10 per cent. in 1997–98, which reflects a great improvement.

In April, the Prison Service issued a new strategy document, "Tackling Drug Misuse in Prisons", which advocates a new strategy in three areas: first, reducing the supply of drugs into prisons; secondly, reducing the demand for drugs and rehabilitating drug misusers; and thirdly, reducing the potential for damage to health. Drug misuse is a serious problem, which is why we conducted a review that led to the new strategy. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we take the problem very seriously and will continue to work hard to deal with it.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): My hon. Friend will be aware, because he is my near neighbour, of the drug problem in north-west prisons. Will he join me in congratulating the officers and nurses at HMP Risley in my constituency on their work in setting up a detox unit in the prison which has finally received funding from the Prison Service? Does he agree that such initiatives are the way to tackle drugs in prisons and drug-related crime because they ensure that prisoners who enter prison addicted to drugs have at least some chance of being drug-free when they leave?

Mr. Howarth: I congratulate the prison staff at Risley on their work. It is important that we understand that the problem is declining. In 1996–97, 24.4 per cent. of mandatory drug tests were positive. That figure fell to 20.8 per cent. in 1997–98. Prisons take a number of different approaches, including detox, and all of them have a part to play. We are determined that, over time, any reasonable approach should be tested and, where appropriate, applied in the prison system.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Nevertheless, does the Minister agree that we face a massive drugs problem in prisons? What extra measures is he taking to detect drug users and drug pushers in prisons? Above all, what is he doing to implement the chief inspector of prisons' proposals to prevent drugs getting into prisons in the first place?

Mr. Howarth: There are a number of measures. One of the ways of detecting drugs going into prisons is increased use of sniffer dogs. That programme is being developed. There are also good examples of strong warnings being issued to visitors to prisons. Several measures are being taken across the Prison Service, but we are not being complacent. The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head without having heard the answer. We recognise that the bulk of drugs that come into prisons are brought in by visitors. The police and the Prison Service work closely together to intercept such visitors and serious action is taken against them. We are doing a great deal, but more can be done and we shall take whatever action is necessary.

Electronic Tagging

11. **Mr. Tom Cox** (Tooting): What assessment he has made of the pilot tagging schemes. [48405]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Research into the first two years of the pilot schemes of curfew orders enforced by electronic monitoring under the Criminal Justice Act 1991 has been published as a Home Office research study. The study indicates that the technology works—which is just as well—and that over 80 per cent. of orders were successfully completed. Further, more detailed research is being undertaken.

Mr. Cox: While I note my right hon. Friend's reply, does he agree that, as the scheme is developed and the proper supervision and safeguards are put in place, we should welcome it as an alternative to prison? At what age can a person be electronically tagged?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's welcome for the measure. It is certainly an appropriate alternative to prison for some offenders, not least because of the cost, which is less than £2,000 per order, compared with some £25,000 a year for a period of imprisonment. My hon. Friend asked at what age a person can be electronically tagged. We are piloting the use of electronic monitoring tags for 10 to 15-year-olds and, so far, 10 orders have been issued in respect of juveniles.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I was struck by the Home Secretary's comment that 80 per cent. of cases were deemed to be successful. Can he explain what happened in the other 20 per cent. of cases, so that the House might know what went wrong?

Mr. Straw: They were unsuccessful. Since the hon. Lady asks, of 973 sentences that were completed, 163 were revoked. If an offender breaks the conditions of the electronic monitoring, he or she is taken back to court and, typically, will be sent to prison.

Arrested Suspects (Drug Use)

12. **Mr. Ken Purchase** (Wolverhampton, North-East): What proportion of people arrested by the police are addicted to heroin and other opiates. [48406]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): The information that my hon. Friend seeks is not centrally available. However, a recent Home Office study on drug misuse by samples of people arrested in five cities showed that 18 per cent. tested positive for opiates; 11 per cent. admitted dependency on heroin; and a further six per cent. admitted dependency on methadone.

Mr. Purchase: Those are alarming figures, despite the fact that they are not as highly refined as the Minister

would like them to be. Will he undertake to oppose the legalisation of heroin and other opiates, not least because that might encourage international profit-seeking pharmaceutical companies to divert production into ever more expensive, highly addictive designer drugs, and those with personality disorders may be pushed into crime in order to afford the ever escalating cost of their fixes?

Mr. Howarth: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The only certain result of legalising—or, rather, decriminalising—currently illegal drugs is that more people would use them. My hon. Friend is right to say that the companies that manufacture such drugs would inevitably spend large sums in aggressively marketing them and targeting a younger audience.

My hon. Friend is also right about so-called "designer drugs". I wish to make a simple point with which the whole House will agree: young people should not be deceived into believing that something labelled a designer drug is safe. All the evidence is that the results of individual cases are totally unpredictable. We have seen far too many examples of young people believing that it is safe to take one designer drug or another, sometimes with tragic consequences. No drug is safe. The only safe way to proceed is not to take drugs.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): Does the Minister accept that at least 50 per cent. of those who appear in court charged with domestic burglary are drug addicts who burgle to feed their habit? Does not that figure show that it is a critical problem in our criminal justice system, which is why it is important to ensure that firm treatment is available to deal with those people, particularly in prison? Will he couple that with his aim to make prisons drug-free zones?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman raised his latter point ingeniously on the back of the question, but it is a fair point. The statistics that he quoted—court figures, showing that about 55 per cent. of those convicted of certain types of offences had committed the offence in circumstances that were drug-related—broadly bear out the Home Office research I mentioned, which shows that about two thirds of arrestees for acquisitive crimes are found to have been involved in drugs.

The links between drugs and, especially, acquisitive crime are now so firm that no one can doubt them. It is important that we act as decisively as possible; that is why, in the Crime and Disorder Bill, we are giving the courts the option of making a drug testing and treatment order. That will not be a soft option, but it will give courts the ability to catch those cases and, in suitable instances, to say to the offender, "You need treatment, but we shall not let you pretend that that is happening when it is not, so there will need to be proper testing to ensure that the treatment is going ahead." That is a good step forward, which has widespread support. I believe that it shows how determined we are to tackle that serious problem.

Fire and Police Service Pensions

14. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What plans he has to change fire and police pension arrangements. [48408]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): On 31 March, we published consultation documents on the police and fire service pension schemes. We have invited comments on those consultation documents by the end of July. We shall listen carefully to the comments that we receive, in considering changes to the pension arrangements for new entrants to the police and fire services and to medical retirement procedures.

Mr. Beard: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he recall that proposals for closing Shooters Hill fire station, which covers part of my constituency, arose out of difficulties in financing the London fire brigade's pension funds? Will he ensure that, in any future arrangements that are made, pension fund arrangements do not influence the strength or disposition of fire services or police services in any part of London?

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend makes a serious point, and I can understand the difficulty that confronts people when local decisions have an impact on the local community. However, there is no magic wand for dealing with the burden of pensions. It would cost about £30 billion to provide a fully funded pension scheme for the police and the fire service, and I suspect that hon. Members on both sides of the House would have other priorities for such sums of money.

There are vast variations in the extent to which ill health retirement pensions act as a drain on the resources of both the police and the fire service. That problem will not go away; it requires good management of the available resources and careful consideration of the options set out in our consultation papers.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Does the Minister agree with the Police Federation and the Fire Brigades Union that it would be unacceptable for two police officers or firefighters, together killed or seriously injured in the line of duty, to have different entitlements to injury benefit, or for the widow and family of one to be paid less pension and other benefits than the family of the other? Notwithstanding the need to review the police and fire service pension schemes, that view is common to both sides of the House, and there is cross-party agreement, especially on the need to eliminate abuse in the area of ill health, which the Minister mentioned.

Does the Minister agree that the dangers faced every day by policemen and firefighters demand and deserve special consideration? The public would find it very difficult to understand it if, when such a tragedy occurred, the widow or family of one had less benefit entitlement than the other. Will he please bear that in mind in his review?

Mr. Michael: I shall certainly bear in mind the points that the hon. Gentleman makes when we consider the outcome of the review. I believe that all hon. Members would accept that police officers and firefighters place themselves in danger in order to protect the public; that is why their schemes are more generous than other pension schemes. I make the point gently, however, that, after the Sheehy report was published, it was the Conservative party that started the differentials between people serving together in different areas. Those differentials are among the difficult issues that must be tackled. If changes are desirable, they cannot be made for those already serving.

Consequently, if one were to accept the logic of what the hon. Gentleman says, one might be trapped in a situation where no changes were ever made.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in areas such as North Yorkshire, where both the police authority and the fire authority have particular problems of sparsity because of the large geographical area and the limited manpower available to them, special consideration must be given to the management problems that those authorities face, to which my hon. Friend referred earlier?

Mr. Michael: The impact on individual forces is set out and considered in the formula that applies to police forces and the fire service. Sparsity is identified as a major complication by police forces and fire services covering rural areas. That is why I have commissioned research into the impact of sparsity, to see whether that can be evaluated. We may have more to say when we see the outcome of that research.

Community Safety Audits

15. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What assessment he has made of the community safety audits undertaken to date by local authorities. [48409]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Ms Joyce Quin): The extent to which that work is already under way varies significantly around the country, and we have not so far made any formal assessment, although the results of local authority association surveys have been published and are a useful guide. We are aware of many examples of good practice around the country. The Crime and Disorder Bill will ensure that the benefits of an audit-based approach to tackling local crime problems are available to communities throughout the country.

Angela Smith: I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that much work on audit and other aspects has already been done by local authorities, including my own in Basildon, without any support or encouragement from the previous Government. The support, encouragement and legislation from this Government have been widely welcomed. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the work already undertaken is used as an example of best practice by local authorities that are just getting off the starting blocks?

Ms Quin: Indeed, we want to build on the good work that has been done in various parts of the country. I am happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work done in her area, Basildon. I should also mention the geographic information system developed by the safer Merseyside partnership and Salford's community safety profiles scheme. The point of our legislation is to support local authorities in such work. My hon. Friend is right to say that the previous Government set their face against requiring local authorities to undertake those responsibilities.

Tote

17. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make a statement on his policy in relation to the future of the Tote. [48411]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): A review of the scope for greater private sector involvement in the Tote is already under way. Before any final decisions are arrived at, we will take full account of a recent internal review undertaken by its chairman, as well as the likely commercial impact of any changes on the Tote, the needs of gambling regulation and the health of horse racing.

Mr. Heath: Before the annual meeting of the Tote tomorrow, and in view of the statements of some privateers and the Treasury, can the Minister explain to the House, first, how the Government will sell something that they arguably do not own; secondly, how he will maintain the integrity of pool betting; and thirdly, how he will ensure that the essential revenue coming from the Tote is maintained, given the parlous state of the horse racing industry?

Mr. Howarth: All the hon. Gentleman's questions fall within the scope of my earlier point that we are concerned about the health of the horse racing industry. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will speak at the Tote lunch tomorrow. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can curb his enthusiasm and wait to hear what my right hon. Friend says. The terms of reference of the review are sufficiently wide to take properly into account the hon. Gentleman's concerns, which we should all share.

Lighter Refill Sales (Young People)

18. **Mr. David Hanson** (Delyn): When he expects to reach a conclusion following the consultation on the banning of butane gas lighter refill sales to under 16-year-olds. [48412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): Depending on the results of the consultation, which we are currently undertaking, we hope to be able to reach a decision in principle at the end of the summer.

Mr. Hanson: How many young people die as a result of the misuse of butane gas lighter refills? Does my hon. Friend accept that there is widespread support among local authorities, trading standards departments, charities, parents and many others for the banning of the sale of butane gas lighter refills to under 16-year-olds, which would be a positive move by the Government?

Mr. O'Brien: The latest figures come from data collected by St. George's Hospital medical school for the Department of Health. They show that 75 deaths in the United Kingdom in 1996 were associated with volatile substance misuse. Gas fuels, usually in the form of gas lighter refills, were involved in 60 per cent. of those deaths. I do not want to prejudge the results of the consultation, but, as my hon. Friend said, there is widespread concern in the country about this issue, and I pay tribute to him for his work in raising and seeking to tackle it.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Would the Minister support a move to introduce voluntary identity cards to enable retailers to judge whether people are aged under 16? Following my local campaign, such cards have the support of North Yorkshire county council.

Mr. O'Brien: The Portman group is already putting forward its proposals, and we have broadly accepted them in a certain context. The issue is whether we can extend them to deal with those matters to tackle the sale of such substances in shops.

Metropolitan Police

19. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on the latest manpower and funding levels of the Metropolitan police. [48413]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The 1998–99 settlement for the Metropolitan police service provides a spending capacity of £1.775 billion, in line with the national average for police authorities in England and Wales. Police strength in the Metropolitan police at May 1998 was 26,585 officers. The Commissioner tells me that it is recruiting and plans to end the financial year with about 26,750 officers and 13,377 civilians.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Although I appreciate the modest increases in the funding and the manpower of the Metropolitan police, does the Home Secretary agree that they are almost being negated because the alarming and increasing amount that is being apportioned to police pensions—a matter which was taken up by the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard)—has to be met? Does he also agree that that alarming increase is affecting the provision of services at the sharp end? I understand absolutely that this is a long-standing problem which certainly cannot be laid at the door of this Government, but will the Minister look to some way, especially in the review and consultation, of disentangling the cost of police pensions from the provision of services at the sharp end of the Metropolitan police?

Mr. Straw: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the impact of the cost of the police pension scheme on police services generally. That point also applies to the fire service. Part of the problem has been the unacceptably high proportion of officers whom chief officers of police have allowed to retire early on grounds that are not acceptable, as the Audit Commission and hon. Members on both sides of the House accept.

The variation is extraordinary: at one end of the scale, only 17 per cent. of officers have been allowed to retire early in Kent constabulary; at the other end, 77 per cent. of officers in Merseyside have been retiring early. That suggests a lack of effective management control of the numbers who are retiring early. We have increased police budgets this year, nationally and also for the Metropolitan police, of 3.7 per cent. We look to chief officers of police to make the same kind of efficiencies as other sectors of the public services, which were subjected to such efficiencies relentlessly—and, in my judgment, quite rightly—by the previous Government.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Will my right hon. Friend, who has referred to the resources given to the Metropolitan police, explain a situation that develops in some of the regions? Is there the same effect on the Metropolitan police as there is in some of the regions? Band D taxes meant that we had a reduction of £6 million for police services in West Yorkshire. Does the same apply right across the board, and does that include the Metropolitan police?

Mr. Straw: The system by which police authorities set a precept is broadly similar across the country and has, for the current year, as for many previous years, been the subject of capping. Within totals of grant and standard spending assessment, which are set by central Government, each police authority has a fair degree of flexibility about the overall amount that it desires to set and to spend on its police service.

Hooliganism (World Cup)

21. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What further sanctions people convicted of causing trouble at this year's world cup face under British law. [48415]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): An Order in Council came into effect on 1 June which allows the courts in England and Wales to impose restriction orders on those convicted of football-related offences in France. We shall examine the circumstances of each conviction to see whether there are lessons to be learnt in respect of restriction orders.

Mr. Pike: Is it not important that we take every possible step to ensure that the small minority of hooligans who do such damage to the name of football and to the name of England are not allowed ever to get away with it again?

Mr. Michael: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend, although as a Welshman perhaps I should not say too much about the name of England. It is greatly to be welcomed that agreement was reached with France before the world cup finals, so that the order could come into effect on 1 June. The restriction order power is operable if we have an agreement with the country and an order has been made under the Football Spectators Act 1989.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): How many of the people who were arrested in France have been charged with an offence?

Mr. Michael: None so far, because, so far as I am aware, none have been released. The matter will have to be considered on their return to this country.

Opposition Day

[17TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Manufacturing and Industrial Relations

Madam Speaker: We now come to the Opposition motion on manufacturing and industrial relations. I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.30 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I beg to move,

That this House views with alarm the Government's creation of a boom and bust economy in the UK, with industry being badly damaged by high sterling and rising interest rates whilst wage and price inflation accelerates; expresses concern at the growth of industrial unrest in several sectors of the economy; and urges the Government to rethink its approach both to manufacturing and employee relations before more damage is done.

"Business confidence hits five-year low": today's business headline in the *Financial Times* and other leading newspapers says it all. The Government are creating a them and us economy: a booming economy for the Government, their advisers and their lobbyists; a bust economy for people who dare to make things or try to sell abroad.

The Government proudly tell us that they have been elected to stop the trade cycle. The President of the Board of Trade is as likely to stop the trade cycle as I am to find a regular tube service on the Central line today. The Government stand Canute-like on the edge of a manufacturing recession claiming that the tide of lost jobs and closed factories is not coming in or has nothing to do with them, while the rest of us see the waves that they have generated enveloping British industry in closures and depression.

When we last debated these matters, the President of the Board of Trade told the House that the Government were to establish a competitive and stable exchange rate. She refused to recognise that, with the pound at its present level, it cannot be both. I confess that there has been more stability recently, but stability of the pound at around DM3 means more stability in the level of pain to manufacturers; more stability in the level of pain and difficulty for those seeking to export; and more stability in the terrible loss of jobs and loss of orders that now afflict our manufacturing heartlands.

It has certainly meant more job losses announced in steel, engineering and textiles. It has meant more job losses in the manufacturing heartlands of the north and the midlands. I hope that Labour Members will, for once, speak up about the fears and worries of their constituents. Many Labour Members represent those heartlands.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I hope that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) will confirm what I have said about the difficulties facing manufacturers in his constituency.

Mr. Sheerman: The right hon. Gentleman is right. Labour Members are concerned when times get tougher rather than easier, and they are not as easy as they could be at the moment. I must respond to the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. Between 1979 and 1997, under the previous Administration, 2.6 million jobs were lost in manufacturing. Blame for the basic state of our manufacturing industry should be laid at the door of Thatcher, Major and the Administrations of which the right hon. Gentleman was a part.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman should have referred to my right hon. Friend as the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

Mr. Sheerman: I am sorry.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The Leader of the Opposition and I have, on several occasions—often at the behest of Labour Members, but sometimes voluntarily—confessed that mistakes were made in the early 1990s when we were in the exchange rate mechanism. Conservative Members regret that: we have been over this matter many times before, and we have apologised to the nation. I am waiting for an apology from Labour Members. Why will they not apologise for supporting that policy? It was the only economic policy of the Conservative Administration that they ever supported, and it was the one that went wrong and did damage.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the measured way in which he responded to that fatuous intervention.

Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in my constituency, companies that have done extraordinarily well in the past few years are now under great and increasing pressure? As of the last few weeks, there is a risk of numerous manufacturing redundancies in the south-east. How does that put the remarks of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) into context?

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend is right. There is a threat to manufacturing jobs in all parts of the country, including his constituency and those of other Conservative Members in the south of England, as well as the areas in the north and the midlands to which I have referred.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield began by agreeing that times are difficult, and I was grateful for that. What he and his right hon. and hon. Friends do not appreciate is this. The present Government now purport to be in control. They have been on watch for more than a year, and they have made many changes in economic policy. It is their tax rates that are now determining our economic future; their interest rates, through the Bank of England, that are determining the future of manufacturing; their sterling rate policy, or lack of one, that is doing the damage. I would have accepted, after a month or two of Labour Government, that what Conservatives had done had had more impact than what Labour was doing. Our case today, however, is that it is Labour's policies that are coming home to roost, and Labour's policies that are doing the damage. If Labour had stuck with our policies, fewer factories would have closed.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): What would the right hon. Gentleman do to reduce the exchange rate? Would he reduce interest rates? Is that the policy that he would pursue?

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for seeking advice from the Opposition in these parlous times

for the Government. If he will restrain his impatience, I will set out later in my speech six measures which I think will help a great deal; but I will give him one easy answer to start with. I believe that the Chancellor should promote savings rather than taxing them. If he promoted savings, the Bank would not need to drive interest rates so high. It has driven them so high because it despairs of the low savings rate in this country, and of excess consumption.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: May I ask the right hon. Gentleman exactly the same question? Would he reduce interest rates—yes or no?

Mr. Redwood: I am saying that the Opposition would follow policies that would produce lower interest rates, even from a so-called independent Bank of England. I will set out at some length the way in which we think the Government, even now, should do that.

Why does the hon. Gentleman not understand that, if the Government reversed their policies on the taxing of savings, more money would be saved and less would therefore be spent? The Bank would then be less worried about inflation taking off in the shops and the service sector, and would not need to panic about interest rates as it has to now, given the awful policies followed by the present Government.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I read in the papers this morning that the right hon. Gentleman's party was about to embark on an apology tour of the country. I hope that he will be leading those in sackcloth and ashes.

The right hon. Gentleman has blamed the early 1990s. Is he aware that the collapse of profits—not yet jobs—in the steel industry arises directly from the increase in sterling that took place in the last year of Conservative Government? Between May 1996 and May 1997, sterling rose by 70 per cent. against European currencies; since then, it has risen by 9 per cent. The former Chancellor is responsible for the 70 per cent., and we are responsible for the 9 per cent. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in condemning the former Chancellor as a useless has-been who has nothing more to say on current economics?

Mr. Redwood: The last Chancellor of the Exchequer did a great deal more good to British industry than the present Government have done in their first year.

The hon. Gentleman should check his facts. There is no way that sterling appreciated by 70 per cent. against the European currencies in a single year—our last year in office. That is complete nonsense. What is true is that the level of sterling when we left office was high but just about bearable for those manufacturers; and it is the further turn of the screw over the past year under Labour that has done the real damage and led to all those announcements of further job losses.

Mr. Sheerman: May I try to be helpful on that point?

Mr. Redwood: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman will be helpful, but I give way.

Mr. Sheerman: I am seeking to be helpful. The Library has given me a list of interest rates over the past 40 years, which clearly show that the previous Chancellor was not the only person responsible for high interest rates and what happened to our country. From 1979 until the most recent terrible recession, Conservative Governments almost without exception were persistently high-interest Governments, who made a competitive disadvantage the bedrock on which our industry had to build. That is the truth. If the right hon. Gentleman wants me to pass the figures to him, he can read them out.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman should look at the real interest rate and understand that we inherited very high inflation from the outgoing Labour Government in 1979. Interest rates in nominal terms had to stay high for quite a time to cure that, but, in the 1980s, with much help from the private sector, the Conservative Government rebuilt, for example, the motor industry, which had been gravely damaged in the 1970s by the Labour Government. Now a new Labour Government, after only just over a year in office, are beginning to do the same sort of damage to those industries that they did in the 1970s—back to the past; back to the problems. There have been more job losses in all the crucial industries and in manufacturing heartlands throughout the country.

Meanwhile, where the Government can make a difference—where the Board of Trade could do something to help business—business is left in doubt about the Government's intentions, as the Government prove unable to make up their mind. We need to know: are the Government willing and able to save the pits, or will coal jobs go the way of those many other jobs in exporting industries that are being lost?

We need to know why we were treated to a non-statement on energy, with all the detail left out and left over for a later date. Why have we been drifting without an energy policy for a whole year? Does the President of the Board of Trade plan to announce a proper policy to the House before it rises? *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry comes in on cue, saying, "Not again." I will go on asking those questions until there is a proper energy policy that we can understand and that the country can either support or criticise.

Does the President of the Board of Trade plan to announce this proper policy before the House rises, or is the intention to leak it to the press during the recess, when we are not able to scrutinise it properly in the House? The right hon. Lady has had over a year to produce a sensible policy and there is still nothing: no detail, no reassurance for coal or for gas, everyone left in the dark. At least the lights are still on, because we have a privatised industry; if Labour was running it, I doubt whether that would be true.

When will the President of the Board of Trade have a policy for the nuclear industry? Has she yet decided how to phase the rundown of Dounreay? Will she tell us if she is satisfied that all the other nuclear facilities that are currently working are safe and have a safe future under her stewardship at the Department of Trade and Industry? How long is she going to hold up gas power station applications? Is she sure that it is legal to do so? When will she realise that, if she wishes to be greener, she has to be friendly to gas?

When will the DTI have a policy for the Post Office? The Royal Mail is being held up by Government delays. The management would like to do some deals with private

[Mr. Redwood]

sector companies throughout the world. The Post Office understands that it is a fast-moving global marketplace and wishes to join in, but, obviously, it cannot do so with a full Treasury guarantee and the current ownership structure. Will the President of the Board of Trade let the Post Office develop as a global corporation doing well for Britain? Is she brave enough to convert the Post Office into a public limited company and introduce private capital?

Mr. Ian Bruce: I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is being somewhat unfair to the President of the Board of Trade. Surely, all those issues are going to be decided by No. 10, the Treasury and the magic circle—and we all know that she is not part of that.

Mr. Redwood: It is true that some lobbyists have put around that slur on the reputation of the President of the Board of Trade, but, for once, I am being fairer to her than my hon. Friend. I am assuming that, in future, she will have some influence on these matters and will at some point use her high office of state to try to do some good for British industry. I confess—my hon. Friend is right—that there is no evidence so far, but I live in hope that she will one day come up with a policy and that that policy may do a little good. Why will we have to wait for a year and a half before the Government can answer simple questions on the future of the Post Office?

I ask the President of the Board of Trade—if she has finished talking to her colleagues on the Treasury Bench—why the Chancellor is lecturing us all on the need to keep wage increases down if we wish to preserve jobs while she is busily legislating to put wages up.

Has the right hon. Lady had any more thoughts about her minimum wage legislation? Does she not understand that our worry about it is primarily that it will lead to all sorts of pay rises for those on rather higher pay who wish to keep their differentials? I have heard no convincing argument from her that that is unlikely to happen. I also find it extraordinary that her Department—in this time of open government, which we know and love so well—is not prepared to give us the figures and forecasts and tell us the truth about how many jobs will be lost and by how much wages will rise as a result of her policy, which is pulling in exactly the opposite direction to that of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. MacShane: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. As he is dealing with the wages problem, would he care to tell the House how much he is being paid as a consultant by Murray Financial to undermine building societies and mutual insurance firms?

Mr. Redwood: I am a director of that company, which is not out to undermine building societies. Although I do not wish to spend the debate answering for that company rather than dealing with matters of public policy, I am quite happy to declare that I receive from that company a director's fee of £12,000 a year, which is a modest one. The company has no intention of raiding building societies that do not wish to talk to it.

I do wish that Labour Members would get away from trying to cast slurs on those who are pursuing a decent occupation, and would get on with understanding the grave problems that the Government face and the Government's relationships with lobby companies. When we come to the real issues at the bottom of this debate, I doubt whether I will receive from Labour Members any answers as straight and honest as the one that I have just given.

Why is the Chancellor of the Exchequer for ever lecturing us on the need for prudence, only then to announce a rapid expansion of public spending? I wonder whether we will even have to come to the House to hear an announcement, as I am sure that we will read all about it in the newspapers well in advance of the event.

Why is so much of the spending to go on welfare when the Government, when in opposition, said that they would spend less on what they then called "economic failure".

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way before he moves too far away from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). The right hon. Gentleman has said that he wants to encourage saving and to keep inflation and interest rates down. Does he not understand that windfalls for the few were one of the main inflationary pressures that led to interest rate rises; that the windfalls were already affecting the economy when the Government came to power; and that he—by joining Murray Financial—will continue them in future?

Mr. Redwood: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman thinks that Murray will be so successful that—from being such a small company—it will have an impact on the United Kingdom money supply. However, I think that it is better if I speak for the Opposition and not for the company, which he is dragging me into doing.

When will the President of the Board of Trade get around to making some decisions on how the new competition policy is meant to work? Does she not realise that the Competition Bill—her Bill—is weak on monopolies and services of general economic interest? Does she not worry that it is so badly drafted that pubs and brewers, newsagents and publishers, oil companies and filling stations still do not know where they will stand when it comes into effect?

It has been a very wet June, and July has been even wetter. The weather has been cold enough to leave people diving for pullovers rather than swimsuits. England was ejected from the world cup competition amid controversy about the conduct of one of the star players, and with relief that a small band of hooligan supporters would return home early. The cricket team has not done well in the tests. I remember Labour saying that things would be better if it was elected. It has not worked out like that this summer.

I do not blame the Government for the deterioration in the weather or for the sporting disasters—although doubtless they would have claimed credit if things had turned out differently—but I do blame them for changing the business climate for the worse. I do hold them responsible for playing the economy so badly that manufacturing is already in recession. I do hold them responsible for disrupting our hard-won trade union settlement with their half-baked reforms. Let us make no mistake about it—Labour is taking us back to the bad old days and the bad old ways of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Government inherited the best strike record of any country in Europe. Last week, there was a firefighters' strike in Essex, today there is a tube strike, and soon there

will be rail strikes. I fear that other public service workers will also go on strike as they watch the private sector wage explosion that the Government have triggered while their own pay falls far behind.

The Government inherited low business taxes. They have already increased them by £25 billion during this Parliament and are planning more tax raids on success and enterprise. It would be helpful to the oil industry if the President of the Board of Trade could tell us something about the Government's intention to raid the oil companies, but I expect that that will be another issue that they will leave until the recess, when Parliament is not here to cross-examine them on another set of tax increases.

The Government inherited low inflation. Wages are now rising at a rate of 5.9 per cent. a year in the private sector, and inflation is well above the outgoing Government's target or the current Government's target. It is not just City bonuses; wage inflation is setting in thanks to Government policies. They inherited a respectable level of savings and they said that the country needed to save more. I agree. That would have been the right response to the gathering momentum in the economy. Instead, according to Red Book figures, the country will save 1 per cent, less of our national income this year—around £8.5 billion less savings—thanks primarily to the taxes that the Government imposed on pension funds and the replacement of personal equity plans and tax-exempt savings accounts with something less generous.

The Government inherited low interest rates. Now, six rate rises later, and with more threatened and likely, things are not nearly so easy for business borrowers. Perhaps the Government foolishly believed one of Labour's five promises: that interest rates would be kept as low as possible. Perhaps the Government will have the gall to say that they honoured their promise, since for them it is not possible to keep rates very low.

The Government inherited a high, but just manageable, level of sterling. They have increased it to a level at which exporting is either impossible or unprofitable for many firms. In place of the success that we were generating, Labour offers strikes, more laws and higher taxes. In place of financial prudence, Labour offers higher public spending.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government are most certainly to be held to account for foolishly giving up for determination by qualified majority voting within the European Union an increasing range of domestic working practices which should properly be the responsibility of elected parliamentarians and the British legislature? Does my right hon. Friend recall that, when challenged on that point by John Humphrys on the BBC programme "On the Record" on 9 November 1997 as to what she would do if the European Commission proceeded with plans for national works councils, the President of the Board of Trade feebly responded, "Well, er, we shall see how things go"? It is not encouraging, is it?

Mr. Redwood: Indeed it is not. The President of the Board of Trade has suddenly discovered two things: first, the proposal is not popular, and, secondly, she may not be able to block it because it may be wanted on the continent. They never explained that to her at No. 10 when they were setting out the joys of the social chapter. *The Wall Street Journal Europe* summed it up rather well, in respect of just such a proposal and just such difficulties, when it stated:

"the only thing "new" about New Labour seems to be an old-fashioned failure—European corporatism".

The Government are busily disguising the true cost of their social security and welfare-to-work programmes, embarrassed as they are about the fact that their spending is soaring well above our totals in the interest of paying for what they always used to call economic failure. In the place of common sense to control wage inflation, Labour has decided to give powers to shop stewards and to Brussels, making it more difficult to preserve good labour relations and inflation-free wage increases.

Mr. Sheerman: Just to be helpful to the right hon. Gentleman, if things are so bad—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Redwood: I was about to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I wonder whether I should do so now, in view of his impatience.

Mr. Sheerman: Before anyone panics at the right hon. Gentleman's tale of decline—if a few people somewhere are still able to listen to the proceedings of the House of Commons—may I refer hon. Members to Mr. Adair Turner's foreword to the July-August edition of *CBI News*? Mr. Turner represents a large section of British business and is very warm about the Labour Government; he is not ringing any alarm bells. He says:

"The Fairness at Work White Paper finally came out in May. As expected, it was a mixture of good and bad news. It certainly represented a shift towards employee rights, but it was by no means as dramatic as might have been feared, and it leaves intact much of the industrial relations legislation of the 80's".

If even Mr. Adair Turner is not worried about what we are doing, why is the right hon. Gentleman so full of doom and gloom?

Mr. Redwood: The Confederation of British Industry is very worried about the social chapter, as it believes that further damaging policies could emerge about which we could do nothing. The quotation that the hon. Gentleman read said that the only good thing about the Government was that they had not wrecked all the 1980s legislation. Surely the answer is to retain the 1980s legislation and to do something else more profitable for British enterprise and jobs.

Labour is creating an economy fit for lobbyists to thrive in. The refusal of the Department of Trade and Industry to spell out an energy policy has encouraged some to try to write that policy by hiring lobbyists. The uncertainty of the Department of Health about tobacco advertising made the Government prone to changing their mind when the right pressure was applied. As manufacturers suffer, lobbyists thrive.

Does the President of the Board of Trade think that that is a healthy state of affairs? Does modernising the economy mean closing down steelworks and textile mills, so that the only growth is in the behind-closed-doors influence business for former Labour advisers, who are now dining out in style? Are we to rest content with a crony economy in which even the Audit Commission needs a lobby firm to do its research? What has happened to all those old-fashioned values that the Chancellor and

[Mr. Redwood]

the President of the Board of Trade espoused in opposition, to sustain an industrial economy in which firms went from strength to strength by making things and selling them abroad?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Hear, hear.

Mr. Redwood: I am delighted that at least one old Labour Member remembers those promises. Unfortunately, as he knows, Labour Front Benchers are not delivering on those beliefs; they are failing to live up to those genuine sentiments that some Labour Members hold.

Today, I ask the President of the Board of Trade to promise a new set of rules to govern lobby companies. Will she reassure us that we shall always be able to know who the directors are, who the principal shareholders are, how much the directors are paid and how much income and expenditure the business enjoys? That is not asking too much, as I am sure Labour Members will agree. Surely the public should be able to know such simple things about a business that sets out to lobby the British Government and to influence public policy.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Association of Public Policy Consultants—the body that looks after lobbying companies—is strongly in favour of precisely the registration that he describes?

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. What he says makes it much easier for the President of the Board of Trade to throw the weight of her office behind such proposals.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Redwood: May I give way at the minute of my choosing? I want to develop the argument a little.

Members of Parliament are paid to lobby the Government in the interests of their constituents. Rightly, we are expected to declare our sources of income and any directorships that we may hold. I decided to discover what I could find out about two of the lobby companies that have recently been much in the news.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: What has that got to do with the motion?

Mr. Redwood: It has a lot to do with the motion. I am arguing that there are two economies. It seems that the only way in which the manufacturing companies, which are in serious distress, can get their message to the Government is by spending even more money on hiring lobbyists to make their case for them, as the Government are bypassing Parliament and not listening to the many representations that we are making. I wanted to know who owned GPC Market Access. I was told—

Madam Speaker: Order. In the past five or 10 minutes, the right hon. Gentleman seems to have strayed a long way from the motion to which he should be speaking. I urge him and other hon. Members to speak to the motion and the amendment.

Mr. Redwood: I will, of course, speak to the motion, Madam Speaker, but part of our case is that, to have more successful Government policies for the industrial economy, we need to change our arrangements for lobbying, and, with your consent, I would like to develop that a little further.

I asked who owned GPC Market Access Group Ltd., and I discovered that it is owned by Countrywide Porter Novelli Ltd.—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have examined the motion and the amendment carefully, and I cannot see how what the right hon. Gentleman is saying relates to them. Could you clarify the matter, because it seems to me that he is totally out of order?

Madam Speaker: I have already made my views known to the right hon. Gentleman. I hope that I have a sense of humour, and I enjoy a little bit of knockabout as much as anybody else in the House, but I think that he should now deal with manufacturing and industrial relations.

Mr. Redwood: As I was saying, Madam Speaker, I believe that we need to know more about how the lobby groups work to see whether they are the right way for manufacturing industry to make its case. I discovered that Diversified Agency Services Ltd. and GPC International Holdings of Ottawa—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman is simply ignoring what you are saying.

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman will not defy me for much longer. I will give him two more minutes to return to manufacturing and speak to the motion.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful, Madam Speaker.

I want the House to know that a company such as LLM is 40 per cent. owned by Robert Stevens Holdings, which in turn is owned by trustees in Jersey. Bedell and Cristin Trustees is owned by Premier Circle Ltd. and Second Circle Ltd., which is owned by Premier Circle Ltd. and Third Circle Ltd., which is owned by Premier Circle Ltd. and Second Circle Ltd.

Why does a lobbying company, set up by former Labour advisers to pursue the interests of, say, manufacturing industry, have such a complicated shareholding structure? What is the role of the Jersey trusts? Why are there three Circle companies, and why do any reasonable inquiries about them go round in circles? Why is one of the companies called Premier Circle? Could there be some mistake over the exacting meaning of Premier in this context?

What do the Government think about the use of Jersey trusts and companies to control shares in other companies owned by former Labour advisers? Did not those same advisers help the Chancellor of the Exchequer when,

as an Opposition spokesman, he made speeches condemning the use of offshore vehicles? Do the Government believe—

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In my constituency, there are many manufacturing units in very real trouble. I had hoped that we would be debating that today. Lobby companies are not known for manufacturing a great deal, except rather more heat than light.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I know that the House has examined the motion carefully, but we should also look at the amendment, which

"welcomes the new culture of partnership . . . developing within the framework of measures and proposals the Government is taking forward".

That is clearly germane to the partnership that the Government now have with the lobbyists and the cronies.

Madam Speaker: I accept that that is mentioned, but the debate has been going on for 32 minutes and we have not yet heard about manufacturing. I represent a vast area that is closely interested in manufacturing. My black country towns will be very interested in this debate. I shall see that my manufacturers have a copy of the *Hansard* report.

Mr. Redwood: I think that I have asked the questions that I wanted to ask about that group of companies, but the Government must answer them, given the width of their amendment and the fact that, like it or not, lobbying is now part of our business culture. Businesses need to be told, fair and square from the Dispatch Box, that the Government intend to go back to the old system: if business has a problem, it lobbies its Member of Parliament, who lobbies the Minister. That is how it should be done. It should not be done through the back door via exotic companies and strange holdings, including Jersey trusts. I hope that the President of the Board of Trade agrees that that is an odd way to behave. The old parliamentary way is the best.

Mr. MacShane: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a firm has the third option of hiring an hon. Member from the Tory Front Bench, just as Murray Financial has done in his own case? Nineteen other Tory Front Benchers have extensive outside interests. That is the real sleaze and corruption that worries the people of this country.

Mr. Redwood: Madam Speaker, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his disgraceful allegation.

Madam Speaker: Order. I was distracted, and did not hear all that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said. Would he repeat it precisely so that I can make a judgment?

Mr. MacShane: I said that what worries people outside the House is the record of Conservative hon. Members in government and in opposition being hired by outside firms to represent their interests. That sleaze and corruption—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have heard enough. The debate should be about policies and principles, not about individuals. The sooner we get on to the policies and principles of manufacturing and industry, the better it will be for the House. The way this debate is turning out is a disgrace.

Mr. Redwood: Labour Members should understand that there is nothing wrong with a Member who is not in the Government holding a directorship that is properly declared, so long as the House is not used to further the interests of the company concerned. If the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) is suggesting that any of my right hon. and hon. Friends has done otherwise, he should make a proper allegation, giving them the right to reply. I can assure him that it is not so. He is just trying to put up a smokescreen to hide the dreadful business culture that the Government are encouraging or allowing to occur.

I turn now to positive conclusions on what we should do to help manufacturing industry.

Mr. Sheerman: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We are getting to the heart of a principle important to a debating chamber such as Parliament. When someone speaks here, does he or she speak for his or her constituents, or does he or she speak for a particular interest that probably pays more than a parliamentary salary? It is important that—

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is speaking on behalf of the Opposition. He has just announced that he is getting to the substance of what he has to say.

Mr. Redwood: I want to make six points about how to help industry out of the terrible position it is in while services and other companies are booming.

First, the Government should promote savings, not tax them. They should change their minds on taxing pension funds, and on replacing personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts with something that is less satisfactory and generous. They should think up new policies to promote savings. It is better to save more than to put manufacturing and exporting into a vice.

Secondly, there is social legislation. We all want people to have decent conditions at work and good health and safety protection. However, does not some of the Government's legislation go too far? It will destroy jobs, and remove opportunities for the young and unskilled people who most desperately need a first step on the ladder. That is not kindness; it is callousness of the first order.

Thirdly, we need stable policies, and statements from the Government of their policies on crucial industries and nationalised companies. We need a policy on financing the tube network, and a resolution of the strikes. We need a policy on energy, so that the gas and coal industries know where they stand. We need a policy on the Post Office, so that it can grow and expand abroad to improve its competitive position there and at home. We need a policy on water competition—we have been waiting for that for a long time—which could generate new jobs and new business. We need a proper policy on competition after a sham of a Bill that is full of holes and errors. The Government have been unwilling to tell companies where they stand.

[Mr. Redwood]

Fourthly, we need a monetary policy that makes sense. The experiment of handing policy to the Bank of England has led to a monthly debate being leaked and discussed in the newspapers. It is a kind of soap opera, with the Government looking on and saying that it is nothing to do with them. They should take some responsibility for our interest rates. They should at least have the courtesy to back the Bank of England, rather than going occasionally around the back to brief against the Bank.

Fifthly, we need to know the truth about the Government's wish to enter economic and monetary union. Will they confess that all the other countries are going in at their exchange rate mechanism mid-rates? Does the President agree that no separate deal was negotiated for Britain, which must mean that what the Prime Minister brought home for British business was entry at DM2.95, our ERM mid-rate? Will the Government devalue the rate or negotiate a special deal? Will the Government tell business the truth: they let business down on this, as on everything else, and it has the opportunity only to enter EMU at a crippling rate?

Sixthly, will the Government set out proper, fair rules of disclosure for lobbying companies? Will they return to the old system, whereby the House speaks for manufacturing and exporting? The Government have a duty to listen, for a change, to what the House is saying. We do not want a culture whereby one must know someone or pay someone in order to make one's point. People must speak through their Members of Parliament and, above all, the Government must take the House of Commons seriously.

4.9 pm

The President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the measures the Government has taken to build an economy which is healthy and sustainable in the long term, including placing the control of interest rates with the independent Bank of England; notes that over the last 12 months investment has grown by 7 per cent., 14,000 manufacturing jobs have been created and the public finances have been put in order; welcomes the new culture of partnership in industrial relations which is developing within the framework of measures and proposals the Government is taking forward; urges the Government to continue its own productive partnership with both business and employees; and condemns the Opposition for its own record in government of allowing manufacturing to decline within a boom and bust economy of unprecedented proportions and actively and sustainedly destroying partnership and democracy in the workplace."

From the outset, I must say that I fear that I am likely to disappoint the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who asked me a string of questions about a string of issues—about which he has raised questions and made speeches elsewhere—that are not related to the subject of today's debate. Unfortunately for the right hon. Gentleman, I plan to speak about the subject of the debate, which the Opposition called. I got the distinct impression from the right hon. Gentleman's speech that, after he called it, he thought better of it, because he did not say much about the subject.

The motion tabled by the right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends creates the impression that they think that this is somehow year zero. They talk about the Government's creating a "boom and bust economy" and about the "growth of industrial unrest". I suspect that the second charge is thrown in just to make up the numbers, so it might be wise to deal with and dispose of it first.

Mention has been made of today's London Underground strike and a couple of other minor industrial disputes, which, of course, we regret very much. However, far from being a signal that the Government's policy is creating unprecedented unrest, tube and rail strikes were not only common under the previous Government but a feature of their last year in office. The denial of investment in rail and underground and the neglect of public transport as a whole eroded morale and trust, and that erosion is part of our inheritance from the previous Government.

We have already taken steps to reverse that investment backlog. In March, the Deputy Prime Minister announced radical and innovative proposals for a public-private partnership for the underground in which it will remain in public ownership but will benefit from the investment so long denied it. The fact that there is still concern about the long-term implications of the programme says more about that inheritance of mistrust and insecurity than it does about any flaws in the policies that the Government are pursuing.

The motion does not refer to the tube strike as such; instead, it expresses

"concern at the growth of industrial unrest in several sectors of the economy".

In roughly the last year before Labour came to office, 1.3 million days were lost through industrial action. In the first full year of this Government, 183,000 days were lost through industrial action. That is seven times lower than the figure for the last year of the previous Government and about 40 times lower than the annual average for the 1980s. That is a record—in fact, it is the lowest figure ever recorded for days lost in industrial action, and the records go back to 1891. I will repeat that in order to avoid doubt: the records date back not to 1991, but to 1891.

Of course, it is perfectly legitimate for the Opposition to comment on and, if they can, make political capital from any industrial relations problems. However, it is a bit damn silly to talk about the growth of industrial unrest in what has been the best year of industrial peace for more than 100 years.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) *rose—*

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way to me, rather than to my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). If the right hon. Lady has available a wealth of statistics stretching back to 1881, perhaps she would care to enlighten the House regarding the number of days lost through strikes in 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979?

Mrs. Beckett: There were not as many as in the 1980s. As I have said, none of those issues in any way alters the fact that the Opposition tabled a motion deploring the "growth of industrial unrest" at a time when there is no evidence whatsoever to back up that claim. Indeed, that is typical of the motion as a whole.

Mr. Boswell: I am sure that the right hon. Lady would not seek to mislead the House, but, taking the years that I

think were cited—I round the figures—the number of days lost was 6 million in 1975, 3.2 million in 1976, 10.1 million in 1977, 9.4 million in 1978, and 29.4 million in 1979. There is no figure comparable with that in the 1980s except for the 27 million days lost in 1984 with the miners' strike. I do not find her figures sustainable.

Mrs. Beckett: It would be superfluous to comment on that. The hon. Gentleman has shot himself in the foot by citing those statistics.

The motion talks of the Government creating a "boom and bust economy". Of course, the Conservatives are the experts. No one has ever been better qualified to talk about boom and bust than they: 18 years in power, unprecedented billions of pounds of windfall profits from the North sea—and they delivered the two biggest post-war recessions, separated by an unsustainable boom.

The motion also talks about the damage to manufacturing from the economic instability that the Opposition claim that we have introduced through

"high sterling and rising interest rates".

Short-term interest rates are below the level at which they were held for the first 13 years of the previous Government's tenure of office.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham admitted, with even more clarity than previously, that the previous Government made mistakes in the 1990s when they entered the exchange rate mechanism. He commented that entry into the ERM was supported by Labour in opposition, although no one ever suggested that we should go in at the rate we did, which was the achievement of the former Prime Minister.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Mrs. Beckett: No.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham was careful to say that the Opposition apologised for that, and that only, as if it was the only mistake to which the Conservative party is owning up. Although he chose to concentrate solely on that period, during their tenure of office interest rates reached 17 per cent. in the early 1980s. At one point in that intensely difficult period, manufacturing output had fallen by nearly 20 per cent. In 1981 alone, 650,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. Between 1979 and 1983, a total of 1.25 million manufacturing jobs disappeared. That was in the early 1980s.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, interest rates reached 15 per cent., manufacturing output fell by more than 5 per cent. and, in 1991 alone, another 400,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. When the Conservatives left office, manufacturing output had increased on average by only 0.5 per cent. in each of their 18 years; so, too, had manufacturing investment.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: Not for a second.

Britain had its first ever deficit on trade in manufactures—at least the first since the industrial revolution when manufacturing was invented in this country. As for jobs in manufacturing, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) pointed out that, when the Conservatives left office, there were 2.5 million fewer jobs than when they came into office. As for the level of sterling, not only did interest rates under the Conservatives reach levels twice as high as they are today, but sterling was at a higher level against the deutschmark than it is today. That was during the period when the shadow Secretary of State was a Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry.

Mr. Gray: As we are getting such a wealth of historical information, perhaps the right hon. Lady will comment on average interest and inflation rates under the last Labour Government. If she is unable to, I am certain that my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) will be happy to enlighten her.

Mrs. Beckett: I would not exactly call this history. After all, the Government have been in office for only 15 months. We are talking about the whole period of office during which the Conservative party was in power. As for the levels of interest rates and sterling, under this Government they are not at anything like the levels that they reached under the Conservative party.

The shadow Secretary of State claims that he acknowledges that and that he and his party have said, "Whoops, sorry," although it was not so full an apology that anyone but he can remember it. He says that we should put behind us their catastrophic record as stewards of manufacturing industry. No chance, I am afraid.

There is no doubt that we can dismiss with contempt most Conservatives' pretensions to speak on behalf of British manufacturing, but that does not mean for a second that I do not fully recognise and acknowledge the genuine concern felt and expressed by British manufacturers at what they see as the current erosion of their competitive position and the sharp anxiety that many feel about their order books, their export prospects and—if the worst comes to the worst—the consequences for employment. At every level, the Government are fully aware both of the importance of the contribution that manufacturing makes to our economy and of the pressures that some manufacturers are presently experiencing. I know that manufacturers' concerns are also heard and heeded by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Back Benches.

Dr. Ladyman: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case that the Opposition have had some sort of vision on the road to Damascus and are now supporting manufacturing. Does she, like me, recollect that, either when he was an adviser to Mrs. Thatcher, shortly before being elected to the House, or shortly thereafter, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) appeared on television and, when asked about the balance of trade and manufacturing industry, replied, "It really isn't important; it really, really does not matter," and repeated those comments in respect of the balance of trade?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I had not remembered that interview—at that time, I was not hanging on the right hon. Gentleman's every word as I do today. I can well believe that the remark can be

[Mrs. Beckett]

attributed to him, because I am well aware that, at that time, that was the view not only held, but expressed, by the Conservatives.

Miss McIntosh: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall give way to the hon. Lady, because she asked first.

Miss McIntosh: Can the Secretary of State give me some guidance? If a manufacturing company in the Vale of York wished to approach either her or a fellow Minister, would her door be open to receive a visit from that manufacturer—the Secretary of State for International Development has suggested that such a contact must come directly from a manufacturing company that is worried, perhaps about the minimum wage or about jobs being lost because of the recession—or would she insist that the company went through a lobbying company before being granted access?

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I must ask the Secretary of State to respond to the hon. Lady before I call another hon. Member.

Mrs. Beckett: I beg your pardon, Madam Speaker. I sought to curtail matters for the convenience of the House. I would say to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) that, although I cannot undertake to accept every single invitation and request, my door is very much open to manufacturing industry—indeed, I do not wait for manufacturers to come to me; I go to them.

Mr. Winnick: There is indeed concern in the west midlands about the current state of manufacturing industry and we do not attempt to disguise that. However, is it not right to recall that when, under the previous Government, we twice went into recession, it was the west midlands which bore the brunt? From 1980 to 1982, large parts of the manufacturing areas of the west midlands were absolutely devastated, yet the Tory protest at the time was, to say the least, minimal. There are hardly any lessons to be taken from a party that caused so much damage to so many people in the west midlands, the heartland of manufacturing industry.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I confess that my attitude toward those Conservatives who, at that time, spoke up on behalf of manufacturing industry is rather different from my attitude toward those who did not.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not recall the hon. Gentleman being one of those who spoke up, so, if he will forgive me, I shall get on with my speech.

It is only fair to recall that many people, whether in manufacturing or elsewhere in the economy, recognise that a range of factors contribute to present circumstances. Those factors include the unaddressed inflationary pressures that we inherited from the Conservatives. In the context of the debate, it is important not to forget that, from December 1996, the Bank of England pressed the then Chancellor to raise interest rates and thus ease the inflationary pressures that the Bank saw building up. There is also the Asian crisis, with its inevitable impact on growth and exports; and the anxieties about the run-up to the euro.

All those factors contribute to the pressure on sterling; all those pressures contribute to the circumstances in which manufacturing industry finds itself; but none of them is the "creation", to use the word in the Opposition motion, of the Labour Government. The fact that what is happening to sterling is, in all likelihood, the result of a complex interaction of those factors means that dealing with that problem is not, as so many Opposition Members try to pretend, simply a matter of taking back interest rate control from the Bank of England or, indeed, of lowering interest rates. It is possible that if interest rates were lowered without regard for the consequences for inflation, as some Opposition Members appear to be demanding, we would increase inflationary pressure without necessarily achieving a lower exchange rate.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Might not that be a clear indication that we should not even contemplate entering the euro until we are sure that it is in our interests?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will be aware that that is the Government's policy. We take the view that it is in Britain's interests to contribute, in so far as we can—as we sought to do during our presidency of the European Union—to a stable development of economic and monetary union and the euro, in case that is one of the factors that are putting pressure on sterling. However, we believe that, if the Government decided to recommend entry, which we would do only if we believed that it was in Britain's national interest, that decision should be put to Parliament and the British people.

Mr. Bercow: Is the right hon. Lady aware of the statement by the president of the Bundesbank, Mr. Tietmeyer, that, within a single European currency,

"it is an illusion to think that states can hold on to their autonomy over direct taxation policies"?

Does the right hon. Lady agree with that statement, which is obviously important because of its implications for manufacturing industry? If she thinks that it might be vindicated, would the cession of sovereignty over direct taxation constitute for her a constitutional bar to Britain entering the European single currency? Yes or no?

Mrs. Beckett: It is rather silly to ask such a question and then ask, "Yes or no?" I was not aware of the statement that the hon. Gentleman attributes to the president of the Bundesbank, but if that is the view that he has expressed, I strongly, indeed violently, disagree. What is more, I suspect that the German Government disagree. That is their problem, not ours.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My question is pursuant to that asked by my hon. Friend the Member

for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), with whom I usually agree about everything in life. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, as we represent Motorola and the paper industry, which are desperate to enter a single currency, there are two views in the party on that subject?

Mrs. Dunwoody: At the very least.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend anticipates me. I was about to say that there are at least two views. I understand that there are particular industries where there is urgent pressure and a great desire for Britain to be an early participant in the euro and that, in other industries, the pressure exists without the same force. I can only repeat to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), which is that the Government believe that the decision should be made by Parliament and the British people, only when it is believed to be in Britain's interests to enter a developing euro.

Dr. Ladyman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, whether or not we ultimately enter the European currency, our motivation for economic policy should be the same? Our need for a stable competitive currency rate and stable low interest and inflation rates will be identical, whether or not we intend ultimately to enter the euro.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right—those factors are in the interests of the British economy, and they are policies that the Government seek sustainably to pursue.

Before we embarked on an interesting diversion, I was talking about the possibility of lower interest rates and how they might impinge on sterling. Before I leave that point, it is right to remind the House that two thirds of the increase in sterling against the deutschmark occurred before the general election. That means that it was in no way the responsibility of this Government, and that it took place before interest rates had begun their recent rise, so it calls into question the suggestion that present exchange rates are fuelled solely by interest rate levels. The lesson, under Governments of either party, of politically driven exchange rate interventions is that it can have an effect, but that it is not necessarily or solely the one wanted or imagined.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham said that the problem was the pressure on savings, and talked as though an unprecedented decline in savings was exacerbating the problem. As I am sure he knows, that is nonsense. The savings ratio is running at some 9 per cent., which is near its long-run average and nowhere near the levels to which it fell under the Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member in 1988, when savings fell to 6 per cent. That is not relevant to the difficulties that some sections of manufacturing—it is not universal—may be facing.

The Government are not prepared to run risks or play games with the economy. We put control of interest rates in the hands of the Bank of England to signal that. Little could be more damaging to confidence than to reverse that policy, as some Conservative Members appear to demand.

Our extensive consultations with the business community before the election and since have produced a short but heartfelt list of what it feels is needed from the Government. That list is headed by a demand for stability in the management of economic policy, which the business community believes will contribute to economic stability. It also calls for consistency in overall policy making and for investment in skills, transport infrastructure and our science and engineering base. All that was heard, and none of it was heeded, by the Conservative party when in government.

However, in the 15 months during which this Government have been in power, not only the interest rate decision but the decision to set a sound framework for prudent, consistent and long-term reform of public expenditure have laid the basis for the policy stability that the business community seeks. The evidence that that is the right course lies in the fact that long-term interest rates today stand at 5.75 per cent.—the lowest level for 33 years.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): I am genuinely puzzled by the fact that Ministers repeatedly point to historically relatively low long-term interest rates as a sign of optimism, because most commentators regard them as a sign of anxiety that we are heading towards a recession. That is why long-term interest rates in Japan are only 2.5 per cent. and why, in the past six weeks, the yield from the long-term bond in America has fallen by 0.5 per cent., reflecting fears that the Asian crisis will have a knock-on effect. Low long-term interest rates are what happens when the markets think that a recession is coming.

Mrs. Beckett: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I am not prepared to get into a great debate with him about the indications of low or high long-term interest rates. It is strange for him to complain that low interest rates are not a good sign, given that the motion tabled by the Conservative party complains about the threat to manufacturing as a result of the level of sterling, which, it claims, results from the level of interest rates.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I am talking about long-term interest rates.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I know.

As I was saying, the windfall tax, which the Conservative party opposed, has funded the start of the new deal for employment. The legislative changes being pushed through by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and his team should foster not just more investment but higher standards from the nursery years through to higher education, which is the push to quality that Britain needs.

We are on the brink of an announcement about the outcome of the comprehensive spending review—the establishment of a three-year framework within which the Government will begin to deal with the backlog of under-investment and decay not only in education or the transport infrastructure, but in our science and engineering base. In each of those areas, an innovative approach to public-private partnership lays the foundation for modernisation and reform, which should deliver not only increased resources but better value for the investment made.

[Mrs. Beckett]

Earlier today, I announced a step change in science funding, to meet the challenge of a potential step change in scientific discovery and understanding. We believe that the human genome project has the capacity to bring about another giant change, not only in understanding, but in the implications for the quality of life, for our approach to health care and for industrial exploitation, which can flow from using the knowledge that that project will deliver.

Today, we have announced a £1.1 billion package secured over the next three years. There will be a £600 million fund for university laboratories, equipment and infrastructure, funded equally by Government and the Wellcome trust, £400 million in capital and current costs for research councils' new project funding, and a further £100 million from Wellcome towards the cost of a new high-intensity X-ray machine, not only to help keep the United Kingdom at the forefront of human genome research, but to contribute to many other research projects.

I do not suggest for a second that that money will ease the day-to-day problems that confront manufacturing companies in Britain, but it is a hugely important signal that, under the present Government, we shall not neglect that seedcorn investment on which, ultimately, our whole economy—and manufacturing in particular—depends.

Mr. Redwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Beckett: Certainly. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman can tell us that a Conservative Government would not seek to abolish such a fund.

Mr. Redwood: Has the Minister some advice for a manufacturer who, today, is looking at the figures and saying to himself, "If sterling and interest rates stay at this level or go higher for the whole of the next six months, I must close my factory, but, if there is relief in sight—if there is to be some improvement—it is worth clinging on"? Would she advise that manufacturer to cling on—or will her Government do absolutely nothing to help him?

Mrs. Beckett: Such a manufacturer will find no answer in the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, most of which have no relevance whatever to him or her.

I am slightly sorry that the right hon. Gentleman could not find it in himself to be generous enough to welcome the £1.1 billion package that I have just announced for the science and engineering base. I would not attempt to second-guess the decisions that any manufacturer or industrialist must take over the next few months; all I can say to him is that, in terms of economic policy and supply side investment, the Government are laying the foundations for the type of long-term prosperity that can alone secure our economy and our manufacturing base, the neglect of which was such a feature of the Conservative party's record in office.

Mr. MacShane: Perhaps the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has not welcomed that remarkable new statement—which, alas, there is no one in the Press Gallery to hear—for the following reason. At page 10 of the latest Library research paper on the economy we read that, in 1997, investment in our country, expressed in gross domestic fixed capital formation,

"was still 2.1 per cent. below the peak reached in 1989"—

so the period when the right hon. Gentleman sat in government was the period in which we invested nothing in our economy.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That was a feature of the Conservative party's entire time in office.

The announcement that I have made today is not the only sign that the Government have given that where we can work in partnership with manufacturing, we shall. Immediately after the general election, we set up the export forum to consider what steps lay within our power as a Government to help and support Britain's exporters, especially small and medium businesses. We reinstated specific support for trade fairs and seminars threatened by the Government who left office last year. Earlier this month, we established the national exporters database. We have introduced the export explorer service, to give small firms first-hand experience of export markets. Later in the year, we shall launch the new sales leads service, which nearly 1,300 companies have already applied to join.

Moreover, directly in manufacturing, in the past 15 months we have pledged £323 million of supportive investment into Britain's aerospace industry—substantially more than the amount that flowed from the previous Government over seven whole years.

We have secured inward investment in pharmaceuticals from Pfizer, with 1,000 more scientific research jobs in Kent, and from Jaguar, Vauxhall, LDV and Honda. In all those cases, investment is bringing more quality and skilled jobs to various parts of the UK. In addition, we have seen investment in jobs in IT, particularly in the east Midlands and Glasgow. All those investments are the fruits of partnership with this Government which look to secure our economy and our employment prospects in the longer term.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I will, but, if my hon. Friend and the House will forgive me, it will be the last time, as I am almost at the end of my remarks.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am grateful. Will my right hon. Friend look carefully at the Export Credits Guarantee Department? I know that it is a difficult area where, because of past problems with particular countries, some contracts are being lost. I understand the difficulty and the reinsurance problems, but will she undertake over a longer period to examine closely what is happening in ECGD?

Mrs. Beckett: We are taking a careful look at the scope of the operations of the Export Credits Guarantee Department. As my hon. Friend knows, it is a high-quality operation which has had great successes. I recognise that there are those who would like it to stretch its wings a little more sometimes, and I shall bear my hon. Friend's remarks in mind.

It is only natural, when people are facing particular difficulties, for them to begin to blame the Government of the day—although not, I hope, for the weather or our

sporting record, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham suggested. It is only natural for them to want the Government to do something, even though the specific action for which they call may neither identify nor address the underlying problems that they face.

It is right for a Government to take those concerns seriously and never to ignore or dismiss them, but it is also right for a Government not to take their eye off the fundamental long-term changes that, in the end are the only basis for sustainable and secure economic prosperity. That is what this Government are determined to do.

The petulance and fury displayed by the Conservative Opposition, trying to fire on all cylinders and certainly firing in all directions, adds nothing to the serious analysis or the resolution of Britain's long-term problems. They had the greatest investment opportunity in our long and sometimes glorious history, and they frittered it away buying short-term popularity at the price of continuing long-term decline. We and the House need no lectures from them. What we need is to continue to work to develop a new understanding and a new approach to making Britain more competitive. It is a task from which we will not be deflected, because it is a task in which the future of Britain requires us to succeed.

4.42 pm

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I am glad that the Conservative Opposition tabled the motion. It seems that they have finally recognised that creating a boom-bust economic cycle of high interest rates and wage and price inflation is not good for the economy. They are right to point out the damage being done to manufacturing industry by an unvirtuous cycle. However, rather predictably, they have begun to lose their way in addressing the problem.

I am sure the House would agree that the present Government did not cause the situation: they inherited it. However, that is no excuse for not recognising the problems visited on manufacturing industry and for not acting to correct them. Having given the Government some credit, perhaps I am now allowed to chide them a little.

It is clear that the Government are in danger of mismanaging the economic situation that they inherited. They have yet to send a clear message to the international community that they mean business when it comes to creating stability and investing for the long term. When they presented last year's Budget, they had the opportunity to dampen consumer spending through taxation—to damp down the side of the economy that was and is overheating. That would have removed the need for the interest rate rises that have increased the cost burden of debt management right across industry.

The pound, which is proving so attractive to overseas investors because of high interest rates, and whose strength is doing to much to damage the export sector, would be lower and would be pitched at a realistic rate.

Dr. Ladyman *rose—*

Mr. Chidgey: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Dr. Ladysmith.

Mr. Bercow: Dr. Ladyman.

Dr. Ladyman: Thank you. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) for giving way—to someone.

My understanding was that the Liberal party campaigned in the general election on the notion of putting 2p on income tax for various good works. Presumably the hon. Gentleman is arguing that that 2p on income tax would have dampened consumer demand sufficiently to make a significant rise in interest rates unnecessary. I would be surprised if any serious economist suggested that that would have saved more than half a percentage point on interest rates. How would the hon. Gentleman have dealt with that situation? Would he have carried on putting income tax up, beyond the 2p?

Mr. Chidgey: I share with the hon. Gentleman the problem of the mispronunciation of one's name. I often suffer from a similar problem, but I hope that he does not feel too flushed by the mispronunciation of his.

Mr. MacShane: Get on with the answer.

Mr. Chidgey: I shall indeed answer the question, as was so accurately said from a sedentary position.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) is wrong on several counts. He has not got his figures right with regard to our manifesto. He may not be aware of, or he may have ignored, a fully costed alternative Budget that we proposed when the Government proposed theirs. I recommend it to the hon. Gentleman. It will make interesting reading, and he may learn quite a bit from it.

The Government should have made an early commitment to join the EMU, which would have encouraged interest rates to fall, accompanied by a fall in the value of the pound. Instead, a combination of inflammatory rhetoric from the Conservative Opposition and indecision from the Government have led the pound to rise even higher.

The Government should not have adopted the self-imposed economic straitjacket of the Conservative spending limits. Taxes on consumer spending could have provided the levels of investment that are desperately needed to repair the damage that has been done to investment in education and training. The billions of pounds in surpluses that the Chancellor is building up in his war chest over the life of this Parliament could have begun the process of reskilling the work force and closing the skills gap that is doing so much to encourage wage inflation in the industrial base.

Mr. Bercow: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will answer the question that the President of the Board of Trade ducked a few moments ago. If Dr. Tietmeyer, the president of the Bundesbank, proves to be correct, and entering the single European currency entails the cession of sovereignty over direct taxation policies, would that, for the hon. Gentleman and his party, represent a constitutional bar to joining the single currency?

Mr. Chidgey: It is the same question, and the same answer. That is a matter for the Germans to worry about. Clearly it is not the policy that we are pursuing.

Before I develop the policies for which we have long argued, I shall define the disease that is gnawing at the heart and vitals of British industry—the disease that the Conservatives failed to diagnose, let alone cure. It is widespread. It afflicts much of the British manufacturing sector. Recent announcements by some of our major

[Mr. Chidgey]

manufacturers—Rover and Vauxhall—have merely served to highlight it. It is important to reflect on the views that they put forward in the press recently.

Both companies said that they were looking to move their components subcontracting from the United Kingdom to continental suppliers, because productivity is not high enough in the UK. Subcontracting is a misnomer, because, as many hon. Members who represent manufacturing-based constituencies know, the subcontracting part of the motor industry is the major part. Press comment that our major manufacturers are to seek supplies elsewhere has a fundamental effect on the economy of those towns and those industries.

Vauxhall and Rover are seeking to move their subcontracting to continental suppliers because productivity is not high enough in the United Kingdom—compared to that of German manufacturers, who have been prepared to take a long-term view of investment in tools and machinery. British firms still seem to be more inclined to rest on their laurels in economic good times and not invest in the future. They will lose if they do not take radical action now.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Chidgey: I shall continue, if I may. The fewer interventions there are, the more opportunities there will be for other hon. Members to speak. Hon. Members should take that on board, as this is a short debate.

Even more worrying, at the time of its announcement and since, Vauxhall has made it clear that the high value of the pound was only one element in the package. Low productivity, which is the result of industrial short-termism and unwillingness to invest, was a more serious issue. For a Government who claim that the punishingly high value of the pound and high interest rates are a result of their preparedness to pursue a long-term anti-inflationary policy, the charge of short-termism in industry is serious; for a Government who have consistently set out a vision of developing a high-skill, high-wage economy—which I agree with, and which my hon. Friends support—losing valuable jobs to continental firms is hardly an auspicious start.

The culture in Britain has to change towards investment, or more jobs will be lost and more industries will join those that were killed off by previous Conservative Governments who sat on the Treasury Bench for those long years. That change requires a long-term strategy. If Ministers were listening to what I am saying, they might reply that they have been in office for only a year and have 18 years of Tory misrule to put right. I am not blaming the Government for the culture that they have inherited, but it is clearly their responsibility to introduce policies to change it. I listened with great interest to the remarks of the President of the Board of Trade. They were encouraging, but far more needs to be done if we are to put our manufacturing industry back on a sound base.

Liberal Democrat Members have long argued that making Britain competitive is not about economic dumbing down and competing on price in world markets. We cannot do that, and neither should we want to. We share the Government's view that we should aim to compete on quality, with the best in the world. For that reason, I look forward to the White Paper on competitiveness. I hope that it will propose realistic solutions to some of the most ingrained problems, which the Government have been elected to tackle.

It is perhaps symbolic that the Conservative Opposition decided to initiate the debate only two days before the announcement of the comprehensive spending review. The President of the Board of Trade gave us a little insight by putting her hand into the sweetie jar and pulling out a few interesting issues for us to suck on, but there is much more that we need to know. We can but hope that this long-awaited review will include a significant shift towards long-term planning in the industrial sector. The Liberal Democrats will judge the review on how much increased investment in education and training is provided. I know the battles that go on.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Engineering Employers Federation recently announced that engineers were having severe problems in meeting—and, indeed, quoting for—contracts, because of the lack of skilled personnel?

Mr. Chidgey: My hon. Friend makes a telling point. Lack of skills is a major problem in industry, and I shall set out what we need to do if we are to give industry opportunities to compete effectively.

There must be much greater investment in education and training. The minimum must be the right to two days a week in education or training for everyone aged between 16 and 18, and there must be an entitlement for everyone to have a period in education or retraining to reskill, at some stage in their lives: as industry develops, technology changes and skill requirements change, so we must change our work force to fit those requirements and to ensure that we do not have another skills shortage looming over us all the time.

We need to expand our higher and further education system, and we must repair the damage that was done under the previous Administration, but that means investment in quality education, not paying lip service to it by increasing numbers for inferior courses. We need a clear commitment to invest in training. If we achieved that, we could start to tackle the skills shortage and do more to calm wage inflation than would any proposal from the Conservative Opposition. Although taking the initiative on training would help to ameliorate upward pressures on wage inflation in the medium term, the Government must also act to remove some of the short-term pressure for further rises in interest rates.

There has been an interesting discussion between Labour and Conservative Members about how important or unimportant it might be for us to join the European single currency; however, let us consider the facts and what is happening in manufacturing industry. Hon. Members really must do something: the most recent survey by the Engineering Employers Federation suggested that, in the second quarter, the balance of engineering output declined to minus 7 per cent., the first time in five years that a negative has been recorded. That is the sharpest adverse quarter-on-quarter change ever recorded. Over the same period, the balance of export orders fell for the sixth consecutive quarter, to minus 25 per cent. The balance of domestic orders fell from plus

11 per cent. in the previous quarter to minus 12 per cent. this quarter. At the same time, employment in the sector fell by 12,000, and capital spending plans are weakening sharply, with a positive balance of only 4 per cent.

To add more information and to emphasise the point, the Institute of Directors business opinion survey for June showed that weak overseas markets are now considered by 42 per cent. of manufacturing industry to be a factor in the limiting of output, and 57 per cent. of directors cited a lack of orders and sales as the main problem. Optimism in manufacturing industry is running at minus 8 per cent., compared to plus 42 per cent. last time.

There are short-term actions that the Government can take to remove some of the pressure for further rises in interest rates. To reinforce the point, the principal action would be to dampen inflation by taxation of consumer spending to release investment for education and training.

The Conservative Opposition's motion raises concerns about industrial unrest and employee relations policy. Not only did the previous Government have some of the highest ever interest rates and inflation rates; towards the end of their term, as the President of the Board of Trade said, the trend in stoppages of work was spiralling upwards. According to Government figures, produced by the House of Commons Library, from the July labour market trends survey, 278,000 working days were lost in 1994, 415,000 were lost in 1995 and 1.3 million were lost in 1996. That compares to 235,000 days in 1997 and only 72,000 in the first quarter of this year. We know where the fault and the blame should lie.

Liberal Democrat Members believe in a constructive and engaged approach to industrial relations—from employers and employees—overseen by a Government without dogmatic attraction to one side or the other. I shall leave it to Labour Members to decide whether the Government have a dogmatic position or dogmatic attraction to one side or the other. Perhaps we shall find out in due time. Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats broadly welcome the White Paper "Fairness at Work". We believe that the proposals offer a start to rectifying some of the wrongs done to industrial relations policy under the previous Administration. The White Paper must be developed, and we intend to focus on extending the Government's as yet unrealised promise of industrial democracy to all those at work in this country.

Above all, the Government must tackle the crisis in manufacturing industry. They must give a clear commitment to the United Kingdom's entry into economic and monetary union and act to dampen down consumer spending. They must also release resources from their multi-billion pound war chest to provide the investment that is essential to closing the skills gap and to enabling industry to produce the best and compete on quality in the global marketplace.

4.58 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I welcome the speech of the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey), because he is a chartered engineer, and is one of those rare beings in the House who has got his hands dirty in manufacturing.

Mr. Chidgey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early. On a point of information, not only am I a chartered civil engineer and mechanical engineer—I have got my brains and hands dirty—but my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) runs a manufacturing company. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not aware that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches speak with a great deal of experience.

Mr. MacShane: Even if I were not aware of that, I sense that, as so often, the only effective opposition in the House is coming not from the two Conservative Members sitting on the Back Benches, but from hon. Members from parties below the Gangway.

As a lifelong supporter of manufacturing, I am delighted that this motion has been tabled. It allows me and any other hon. Members with a shred of intellectual honesty to place in front of the House the sorry record of the Conservative Government, who undermined, weakened and scorned the needs of manufacturing. By sheer chance, on Friday night I spent three hours with a group of representative employers from my constituency, which lies at the heart of the traditional manufacturing sector in the United Kingdom economy. It was a good discussion, and I shall put some of their points and comments on the record, because I want Ministers to consider what they had to say.

This debate will continue: it is not a fixed announcement of policy. There is a crisis about what kind of a nation we want to be. The fall in the manufacturing sector of our economy, which has been accelerating in the past 20 years, needs to come to a stop and, where possible, to be reversed. We have gone through the years in which, as the former Chancellor Lord Lawson said, it did not matter how people made a pound—whether it was by trading a pound or making a product. We have gone through the years when all that counted was the weightless economy. Just look at the contents of our homes, what is on sale in our shops, and the number of cars we drive. We live in an economy that is more weighty than ever.

I hope that Britain will start to make a little more of what we and the rest of the world consume. To achieve that end, we shall need a significant change in policy.

Mr. Boswell: Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on events since May last year? Have the Government shown a greater sympathy towards manufacturing industry or the service sector? Which of those sectors has done better during that time?

Mr. MacShane: A culture inimical to manufacturing existed not just during the 18 Tory years, but for longer. Under the present Government, 14,000 new manufacturing jobs have been created in the United Kingdom. In my constituency, British Steel is taking people on, but it cannot make a decent profit because of the value of the pound. I shall come on to that, because these points need to be raised. But the difference is that only in Britain has it been the fixed and focused policy of the Government, when in the hands of the Tories, to do down the UK-owned and managed manufacturing sector.

Manufacturing may be different from the service economy, because, perhaps more than any other sector, it requires stability to plan for the future. Last week, I went to Bournemouth. I got up early, picked up some papers at the House of Commons and walked across Westminster bridge. I had not had breakfast, so I went into a typical

[Mr. MacShane]

part of the service sector: a cafe underneath Waterloo station. I asked for a bacon sandwich with brown bread. Two young girls were smoking and examining their fingernails. One of them eventually got up and told me that she did not have any brown bread.

I went next door to make the same request, but there was no one behind the counter—that is the service economy that the Tories created. Someone finally arrived, but there was no brown bread—bacon, yes; tea, yes; but no brown bread. I like my brown-bread bacon sandwiches.

I went into Waterloo station, where I saw a bagel stand. Three young men and women were sweating like dogs. They had six different types of bagel and a dozen different types of fillings, from Marmite to marmalade. They were working hard to produce what customers wanted. That is the service sector that Labour should be backing, and we should abolish the old Tory sector that could not provide clients with what they wanted.

Bacon sandwiches apart, cafes and bagel stands may come and go, but manufacturing requires stability in three areas: first, in the cost of its inputs and the price of its outputs; secondly, in the availability and cost of skilled labour; and thirdly, in the prospects for its markets. In the past years, we have known nothing but chronic, enduring instability in all three areas. Virtually all the present problems facing manufacturing—I do not deny that there are real problems—arise directly from the previous Government's irresponsible handling of the economy.

We may exclude the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), because he was not part of the previous Government during their last one or two years. However, before he became a Member of Parliament, he was one of the chief advisers to Mrs. Thatcher, and he participated in the culture of hostility to manufacturing that developed so strongly in the 1980s.

Mr. Redwood: I should like to correct the hon. Gentleman. I had no hostility to manufacturing then, and I do not have any now. I have been a model of consistency on this issue. The advice I gave included advice that would help manufacturing.

Mr. MacShane: The right hon. Gentleman reminds me of the general who reported back to the Roman emperor, who then said, "They created a desert and called it peace." The wipe-out of manufacturing in the 1980s—when the right hon. Gentleman was not an MP, but was an adviser to Mrs. Thatcher—is one of the industrial crimes of the century.

The real culprit, however, is not the right hon. Gentleman: it is the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who is not present. I think that it was the poet W. H. Auden who said that history sometimes forgets, but it never pardons. I do not know whether history will forget the previous Chancellor, but his party will certainly never forgive him. His flippant and irresponsible stewardship of the economy led to the Tory wipe-out at the last election.

As my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade said in her excellent speech, 70 per cent. of the rise in sterling since May 1996 occurred under the Tories. The increase in the rate of money supply nearly doubled in the last year of Tory government. Interest rates were held down deliberately to maintain a pre-election boom. Fat use that did them, because the British people are much wiser than the Conservative party. There was no serious, sustained investment in manufacturing.

Mr. Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: May I finish my point first? The right hon. Gentleman was more than courteous in giving way to Labour Members, so I shall repay his courtesy.

As the hon. Member for Eastleigh said, under the Tories there was no investment in training. There was a decrease in the amount of fixed capital formation—an absence of investment essential to any successful manufacturing economy. Short-termism was rampant: dividend payments were maintained at all costs, even at the expense of investment, training and jobs.

Mr. Redwood: For the sake of accuracy, I should point out that the money supply did not double in the last year of the Conservative Administration, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. Indeed, it did not double even in the last five years of that Administration.

Mr. MacShane: I am terribly sorry, but the right hon. Gentleman did not listen to me. I said that the rate of increase in the money supply nearly doubled. If he wants to check the facts, I refer him to an excellent House of Commons publication on GDP indicators.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would let me make a little more progress.

I want to refer to the talks that I had with employers in Rotherham last Friday. It was a varied group of men and women. Rotherham has a combined chamber of commerce and training and enterprise council, which is also associated with the business link. One organisation represents about 75 per cent. of the employed people in Rotherham. I commend that model to other parts of the country, because it concentrates the voice of employers.

At what was, in effect, a seminar—I hope that similar meetings take place in the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and, indeed, the counsels of the Opposition parties—the question was asked, should we raise taxes? I think that the hon. Member for Eastleigh suggested that we should. In fact, a number of taxes on consumption, such as insurance premium taxes and the tax on cigarettes, have gone up; but the response of those selling goods in Rotherham was, "Hang on a second: we need to maintain demand."

What about interest rates? My good friend Brett Ainsworth, who runs a metal company that has been successful on both the domestic and the international scene, said that the Chancellor, or rather the Monetary Policy Committee, should lower them by a quarter of 1 per cent. I must say that I am not entirely sure that a quarter of 1 per cent. is all that significant.

As inflation remains a worry for the men and women to whom I spoke, I asked them about the minimum wage. "We welcome it," said one hotel keeper. "It will solve the problem of the low-wage competition that has been undermining us."

One issue that bubbled up surprised me, because I do not associate South Yorkshire with the keenest of views on Europe. There was a feeling that Britain was not being clear enough, as a nation—no blame was attached to any particular Minister or party—about European monetary union. Those people respect and appreciate our Government's view that ultimate democratic control rests in the hands of the people through a referendum—and, having raised the issue in my maiden speech four years ago and subsequently written an article in *The Times* arguing in favour of such a course, I am wholly behind it.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way, on that point?

Mr. MacShane: On that point, yes.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman, who has been present throughout the debate, will know that I have twice asked a simple question, to which I have not received an answer. He has a well-deserved reputation for clarity and consistency, and also for being strongly in favour of a single currency. If, as Dr. Tietmeyer believes, the single currency involves the cession of sovereignty over direct taxation policies, is that objectionable or acceptable to the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. MacShane: If the hon. Gentleman sends me the quotation from the good Professor Tietmeyer—

Mr. Bercow: Doctor.

Mr. MacShane: All professors are doctors in Germany. It is not possible to get such a job without a doctorate.

If the hon. Gentleman sends me the quotation from the good Professor Herr Doktor Tietmeyer in the original, I will check it and send him a reply in English, if that would be helpful.

What, then, needs to be done to secure the stability that was the primary demand of the employers in manufacturing and other sectors to whom I spoke in Rotherham? I believe that the Chancellor was right to set up the Monetary Policy Committee, and I said so before the election. I think it remarkable that our country did not adopt such a course years ago, because—for social democratic Netherlands, or capitalist United States—independence for the central bank is a given. The fact that, when in power, the Opposition baulked at that decision shows their lackadaisical approach to policy making.

I would, however, like the Monetary Policy Committee to be more representative of the nation as a whole, and in particular of industry. I do not doubt the intellectual ability of its members, or their desire to serve the national interest as they vote each month on the setting of interest rates; but I see no face and hear no voice from industry, and observe little representation from the country in general outside the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and Islington.

The MPC might like to hold some of its meetings in other parts of the country. It might like to come and meet the employers to whom I talked last week. Having done so, it might of course hold to its decisions—that is its affair—but those who make the decisions in the Bundesbank and the American Federal Reserve are located in the regions and far-flung corners of those two countries, at least, and report back faithfully. I do not think that the needs of manufacturing have been reflected in the MPC's decision.

It may well be necessary to look again at the MPC's mandates. The United States Federal Reserve is charged, under the appropriate Act of Congress, with developing a monetary policy

"commensurate with the economy's long run potential to increase production, to promote the goals of maximum employment, stable prices and moderate long-term interest rates".

That is a heck of a package to discharge, but it certainly involves a bit more than the bearing down on inflation which—judging by its minutes—is the MPC's main obsession.

One reason why the American economy has been so strong in the last 10 or 12 years is the stability of interest rates, money supply and much of the value of the dollar—although it has been zig-zagging as a result, for instance, of the Asian crisis. American manufacturers have been able to borrow and sell, knowing what they will get back in a year or two—knowing the price of the money that they borrow in order to invest.

By contrast, under the Conservatives—and, frankly, Governments of the 1970s: I am sick and tired of this absurd game of ping-pong—we had a yo-yo economy. Interest rates, the value of the pound, capital formation and prices went up and down, up and down. We have been living in an Alton Towers rollercoaster economy, in which it was impossible for manufacturers to invest.

We have a real problem with pay. You were not in the Chamber at the time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but earlier I had some fun at the expense of the shadow President of the Board of Trade and his new job with Murray Financial. He was honest, and revealed to the House that he is earning £12,000 a year in that job.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that Madam Speaker made a ruling on that. We must keep to the subject of the debate.

Mr. MacShane: I was actually praising the right hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no need to praise; just keep to the subject.

Mr. MacShane: It is the first time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I expect it to be the last—but, if I cannot even praise where praise is due, I will pass on.

Large pay increases awarded to themselves by those with the power to do so are having a very negative impact on pay pressure within the economy. It is impossible to open a newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, *The Times* or *The Guardian*, without reading about someone somewhere—I will not go through the list—awarding themselves large pay increases detached from productivity, unit labour costs and unit prices. Until that problem is tackled, instability will continue.

I was delighted by my right hon. Friend's announcement of a £1.1 billion investment in science. I hope that lifelong learning, the university of industry and the tax incentives for research and development, which are under review, will come to fruition.

[Mr. MacShane]

It is crucial, if we are to make a success of the manufacturing economy, never to be in the position of a Labour Chancellor some 50 years ago. When the Government of national unity collapsed in 1931, different decisions were made. Philip Snowden said, "No one ever told us we could do that." I urge Ministers to bear that in mind. We must be flexible. The last Government were not flexible, and the official Opposition have offered nothing today. I am still waiting for one speech from them that contributes anything positive to the debate.

Mr. Redwood: There were six points.

Mr. MacShane: None of those points was relevant to my constituency, or to the needs of the manufacturing economy.

I wish Ministers well. This is a huge subject. We will have to come back to it, but, if our country does not reverse the Tory years of anti-manufacturing economic policy, heaven help us all.

5.19 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): That was a very interesting speech. In fact, I prefer the speeches of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) to his interventions. I particularly noted his comment that, if the Monetary Policy Committee had different people on it, it might come to different decisions. Conservative Members would be less agitated if it did come to different decisions. My short speech will contain something about what the committee should do, but I could not resist starting my remarks in that way.

The motion is in two parts, and I wish to say a little about both, but, first, I wish to thank the President of the Board of Trade, her Ministers and the civil servants for the way in which they listened and acted in response to the joint appeal, from management, unions and all of us who are concerned for industry in Bedfordshire, about the future of the Vauxhall car plant in Luton. We have come through another period of great anxiety about south Bedfordshire's industrial future. If the right economic policies are pursued, because of its history of vehicle building and component manufacturing, our area can still become the Detroit of the United Kingdom, with all the economic advantages that that will bring—but it will need the right economic policies.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir David Madel: I have only just started, but I shall give way.

Mrs. Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman contrast the action of the President of the Board of Trade to which he has just referred, with the action that was taken by the Opposition when they were in government? In 1993, Leyland DAF collapsed, putting at risk thousands of jobs in truck manufacture. In Lancashire, when appeals were made to the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, he stated that nothing could be done. However, Labour-controlled Lancashire county council's economic development agency worked with the private sector and together they invested in the successful Leyland Trucks. Lancashire Enterprises continued to develop the 200-acre site, where there are now over 2,000 jobs in 45 manufacturing companies, none of which would have been there if anyone had paid any attention to the statements by the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Will the hon. Gentleman contrast what the Conservatives did then with what—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Sir David Madel.

Sir David Madel: I could take much time in the House debating truck manufacturing, truck production and what has happened in Dunstable, where we have lost all truck production, but I will say this to the hon. Lady: I have always believed that, in 1986, if the General Motors-Leyland Trucks-Rover deal had gone ahead, which some of us wanted, there would have been a future for Dunstable in vehicle building. Alas, there is no vehicle building there now. We are trying to put that right.

One of the reasons why that deal did not go through was that some hon. Members started shrieking idiotically about the possibility of the stars and stripes appearing on the Land Rover and Range Rover bonnet. Who owns Rover now? I do not think that I shall take the argument any further. However, if the hon. Lady is talking about what should have been done about truck manufacturing and whether different policies should have been pursued, we are in agreement, especially as Dunstable was badly affected.

Mrs. Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir David Madel: I shall, but other hon. Members wish to speak. I hope that the hon. Lady will be brief.

Mrs. Ellman *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has to make a brief intervention.

Mrs. Ellman: The point that I am seeking to make is that, in 1993, the Government of the day refused to act, but action was taken by a Labour-controlled local authority, which resulted in the saving of truck manufacture in Lancashire and of thousands of manufacturing jobs in Lancashire and beyond.

Sir David Madel: The point that I am trying to make is that, in 1986, when there was a proposal for a General Motors-Leyland deal, the Labour Opposition kicked up a terrible row. One of the consequences was that, eventually, Dunstable lost all its truck production. I know that we have just had Wimbledon. We could say "30 all" on that. If the hon. Lady will excuse me, I must move on.

As I have been talking about Vauxhall, I wish to make one point about the speech of the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey), the Liberal Democrat spokesman. His remarks were a bit downbeat and not very encouraging about Vauxhall. Do not worry: the new Astra productivity, production and quality in Ellesmere Port are just as good as on the continent. If they were not, 1,000 extra jobs would not be going there, so I hope that the Liberal Democrats will not mislead the country on economic conditions locally. They certainly misled people in Bedfordshire in 1986.

As I said, I am grateful for the help that the President of the Board of Trade gave us on the future of the Vauxhall plant at Luton. However, I hope that she has already done a further thing to help us: I hope that she has made strong representations to the Deputy Prime Minister on the White Paper on roads, which will soon be with us. We in Dunstable and Luton urgently need certain roads for our improved infrastructure. That is vital for industry, for employment and for future employment.

I hope that, having helped over Vauxhall at Luton, the President of the Board of Trade will be able further to help us with getting those new roads built, which are vital for our local industry. We cannot have industrial and employment policy in Bedfordshire decided by the antics of Friends of the Earth. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I am here to represent my constituents and, in view of the history of my constituency and what we have been through, that means above all fighting endlessly to get a more secure employment base.

In view of what has been said, I assume that DTI Ministers are getting increasingly anxious about what is happening to the manufacturing sector and about the policies pursued by the Monetary Policy Committee. Last Friday, there were three quotations in *The Times* from three people who come from entirely different wings, if you like, of the political spectrum, on the present policies of the committee. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in criticising the committee:

"The way you cause bust is that you carry on tightening policy when the economy is already going down."

The Engineering Employers Federation said:

"We would urge the MPC as soon as possible to signal that interest rates have peaked and that the next move will be downwards."

Ken Jackson, general secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, which has many members in Bedfordshire, said:

"The recession will continue until the Bank ends its war of attrition against manufacturing industry."

I agreed with quite a bit of what the hon. Member for Rotherham said about how the Monetary Policy Committee could become more involved in industry. I think that industry feels that it is simply not getting its message across to the committee. In fact, the committee might invite the President of the Board of Trade and some of her Ministers to sit in on some its meetings. It is the committee's duty to become far more heavily involved in the worries and needs of industry, and to pay far more attention to industry's view, rather than ale-house gossip in the City.

People in industry are being pushed to their absolute limits on the factory floor to secure export orders and, once they are secured, to ensure that they are delivered on time. I look to the MPC to start to work with the grain industry, rather than giving the impression of working against industry.

On industrial relations, I should like the Government to take a leaf out of our book and leave many things as they are. The change of Government was a year ago. There was a change of Government in 1951, after six years of a Labour Government. In moving the Loyal Address, the then Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, said:

"What the nation needs is several years of quiet, steady administration, if only to allow Socialist legislation to reach its full fruition."—[*Official Report*, 6 November 1951; Vol. 493, c. 68.]

I should like to turn that around: what the country needs is several years of quiet administration, to allow Conservative trade union legislation to reach its full fruition, rather than pulling it about and starting to change it around. This country does have greater industrial stability, and I hope that the Government will make a gesture in that way.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, however, the motion mentions

"industrial unrest in several sectors of the economy".

There is one sector in which matters have not improved but become worse in the past 12 months. From April 1997 to April 1998, just over 30 per cent. of all days lost were accounted for by stoppages in the transport, storage and communications sector, predominant recent stoppages on London Underground and Railtrack. The biggest single cause of action was pay—wage rates and earnings levels—followed by disputes over manning and works allocation.

There must be a way of achieving industrial peace in the railway industry. I cannot think of any other industry in which work conditions have improved more since the war. In 1945, the industry had steam trains, coal had to be shovelled and there were many difficulties. An enormous effort has been made to improve industrial conditions in the railways. The Government, in their heavy emphasis on greater use of public transport, are creating an atmosphere in which people entering the railway industry should be able to look forward to steady and secure employment. Somehow or other, we have to transform the atmosphere in the railway industry.

Since the war, there have been some remarkable breakthroughs in industrial relations—one of the best of which was the productivity agreements, in the 1960s, at the Fawley oil refinery, near Southampton. A whole range of improvements in that industry followed the agreements.

Mrs. Dunwoody: If the railway industry was able to offer its members the pay rates that are common in the oil industry, many railway men and women would be highly delighted with their jobs.

Sir David Madel: The hon. Lady and I have discussed the railway industry in the Select Committee on Transport, on which I was pleased to serve when she was Chairman. If I may develop the argument a little more, I think that she will see what I am getting at.

I am convinced that the railway industry and management can draw on good practice in other United Kingdom industries, to move towards better industrial relations. I am convinced that in that industry we can move, by negotiation, to single-union recognition, no-strike clauses and three-year wage agreements. Although it will not be done overnight and it cannot be forced through, there is sufficient experience in other parts of UK industry to show that it can be done, although it will take time.

I tell the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) that thousands of my constituents now depend—and even more of them will come to depend—on peace in the railway and tube industries to get to work. Jobs in the industry should become ever more secure. It is the challenge of management and unions to make industrial peace happen, and to move to the type of industrial peace that exists in many other sectors of UK industry.

[Sir David Madel]

One of my worries about the Government is that we have a restless Prime Minister and a restless Cabinet, always looking for things to do. That is not the best way to govern the United Kingdom. The best way to govern this country is—

Mr. MacShane: To do nothing.

Sir David Madel: No; it is to deal with matters as they arise. In this debate, we are talking about a problem that has arisen—the plight of manufacturing industry. I do not think that there are enough signs that the Government are responding positively to our worries about that industry.

I remind Labour Members that every Labour Government we have ever had left office with unemployment higher than when they took office. The way that the Government are going about matters, the same will happen again—I fear that history will repeat itself. If that happens, where will the welfare-to-work programme stand?

5.33 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): We have had an interesting debate, in which some hon. Members, including the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), seemed to argue—it is the first time that I have heard such an argument in the House—that the Government should not try to be proactive, but sit back and wait for events, to which they should react. I strongly suspect that the Government would soon be criticised by Conservative Members if they were to take that advice.

We heard an interesting speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who made a powerful case on several matters—not least on brown-bread bacon sandwiches. I hasten to add that he made that case without having to resort to lobbyists or any outside agency.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) made an interesting speech, on which I should like to focus for a few moments. His thesis was that the Chancellor should have raised consumer taxes to take the heat out of the economy. There is no question but that some money has to be taken out of the economy and that increasing interest rates is currently the main mechanism of doing so. One aspect of the monetarist thesis that now seems to be generally accepted is that a major factor in increasing inflation is money entering the economy more rapidly than goods to "absorb" that extra money. Consequently, the extra money has to be "sopped up" by inflation and increased prices. The hon. Gentleman therefore seemed to be agreeing with the thesis that removing money from the economy is a good way of controlling inflationary pressures.

The mistake made by the hon. Member for Eastleigh was to suggest that that extra money should be returned to the economy in immediately increased public sector spending. Such spending would not produce the downward effect on inflation that he seemed to advocate. Although he recommended that we spend the extra money on valuable projects that I agree require further investment, the economic circle could be squared only if he were to propose that we not only increase consumer taxes and spend that tax revenue on good works, but increase interest rates—exactly as has happened—or cut public sector expenditure in other spheres. If such action was not taken, increased public sector spending would not achieve the effect on inflation that the hon. Gentleman desires. That is the fallacy in his argument.

Mr. Cotter: As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) has left the Chamber for a moment, I should like to defend him. We have proposed a balanced Budget, and to pick out one aspect of it without considering the others is not to consider the whole.

Dr. Ladyman: I am going only by what the hon. Member for Eastleigh said in his speech—I cannot do more than that. I confess that I have not read in great depth the Liberal Democrats' proposed Budget, but, even if it is a balanced one, without increasing interest rates it would not serve the necessary purpose of reducing inflation. The Liberal Democrats are therefore not offering any proposals to end the Chancellor's dilemma, in which—people generally agree—interest rates, and consequently the pound, are too high.

Mr. Cotter: As I said, we have a complete policy. It would be wrong to try to deal with that policy in a short intervention. However, a part of our proposals on making progress on lowering interest rates is an early single currency timetable.

Dr. Ladyman: I shall return to the single currency issue later in my speech. A belief that I have propounded many times is that in the House we could do with a lot more agnosticism about the single currency. A few hon. Members are absolutely wedded to the idea of entering it, and fewer hon. Members are wedded to the idea of never going in. I think that we need a little more open-mindedness by all hon. Members, so that we can judge what is really in the United Kingdom's best interests.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has left the Chamber. I was delighted to hear his—as I said earlier in the debate—almost damascene conversion to the cause of manufacturing industry. I have absolutely no doubt from the performances that he gave on television—when he was an adviser to Margaret Thatcher, before his election in 1987, as he was beginning to climb the steps of promotion in the Conservative party—that he was not being helpful to manufacturing industry.

The quotation to which I referred in my earlier intervention was absolutely accurate. The right hon. Gentleman said that he did not consider the balance of trade significant and that it should not be used as an index of whether the economy was going in the right direction. Therefore, I am delighted that he now supports manufacturing industry.

Today's debate shows that economics is extremely complicated. As the Conservatives failed to understand that in 18 years in government, it is unlikely that they will have learned to do so after 14 months in opposition. One matter on which we all agree, but which the Conservatives appear to be trying to forget, is that at the end of the day inflation is the company killer. It kills exports and will ultimately damage the prosperity of the United Kingdom, so we have to get it out of the system.

I acknowledge some fault on behalf of the Labour party. Perhaps previous Labour Governments did not realise quickly enough the danger of inflation and the

damage that it can inflict. That failing was shared by the Conservatives for a considerable time, but at least we have grasped that now. We realise that, once inflation gets into the system, it puts prices up for ever. It cannot be reversed a few months later. However, if it is necessary to increase interest rates to get inflation out of the system, at least they can come down again. In the long term, they are less harmful than inflation. We have to set ourselves a target in respect of inflation. Deep down, that is the view of all industrialists and those in the manufacturing sector who are currently struggling.

I have received representations from manufacturers in and around my constituency about the effect of interest rates and the high pound. I share their concerns, but in the long term, inflation is what really hurts them. I believe that they share my objective of getting it out of the system.

As everyone is aware, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set up the independent Monetary Policy Committee to set interest rates. Let us speculate for a moment what would have happened if that committee did not exist. The Chancellor would have received the same data and the same advice. Presumably he would have had the same motivation as the Monetary Policy Committee, so it is likely that, at least originally, the same decisions would have been made. There might have been differences in the interpretation of the data, but broadly the same decisions would have been taken.

Sir David Madel: One hopes that the Chancellor would not do what the Monetary Policy Committee has done in every decision—it always over-corrects.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Perhaps the Chancellor would have done things slightly differently. In the long term, however, my fear is that, when the going got tough, the Chancellor would ultimately have done what Chancellors have always done, and under-corrected. If that was the case, he would not have increased interest rates when that was necessary. There was considerable evidence of that towards the end of the previous Government's period in office. Although there was clear information about the inflationary pressures in the economy, the Government did not increase interest rates as quickly as they should have done.

Mr. Boswell: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. Does he agree that the essential difference is that, when there is no independent Monetary Policy Committee, the Chancellor alone is responsible for those decisions both to the House and ultimately to the electorate? Under the present arrangements, the responsibilities are confused and to some extent deniable.

Dr. Ladyman: I do not accept that at all. Responsibility for decisions by the Monetary Policy Committee ultimately lies with the Government. The Government must be prepared to say, "We set up the mechanism, so we shall take responsibility for it." I do not accept the argument that responsibility is in any way diffused.

There is, however, a growing danger in respect of the Monetary Policy Committee, which I would ask the Chancellor and his ministerial colleagues to bear in mind. The committee has to focus only on the target that the Government have given it. During various dinners and meetings, I have spoken with at least four members of the Monetary Policy Committee. They were absolutely focused on the target that the Government set them—the inflation target. That was absolutely right. They said several times, "We cannot look at other matters. We cannot consider unemployment or sterling, because we have to focus on meeting the Government's inflation target, as that is the only task that the Government have set us." Now that the Monetary Policy Committee has reached the centre of economic debate, my concern is that some of its members may now try to act as quasi-Chancellors, by making political judgments and considering economic factors other than the target that the Government have set them.

Let me use an analogy. I was once given a flying lesson as a birthday present. When the aeroplane was coming in to land, the instructor explained the process of getting back down to terra firma without an almighty bang. Basically, one has to set the flaps and prepare the aeroplane for landing before slowly reducing speed. At the same time, one has to adjust the position of the nose of the aeroplane so that it remains level. He said, "It is very complicated doing everything at the same time, so I shall adjust the engine speed while you keep the nose of the aeroplane up. You focus on doing that." Because he had taken the other factors off my shoulders, I was able to focus on that one task, so the aeroplane landed safely.

In many ways, the Government have reached exactly that arrangement with the Monetary Policy Committee. They have set the target. The Government have taken the political and economic decision that inflation should be 2.5 per cent. and have given the Monetary Policy Committee one tool with which to achieve that target—interest rates. So long as the Monetary Policy Committee focuses on that target, the Government will know that, by hook or by crook, the 2.5 per cent. inflation target will be met, and they will be free to concentrate on the rest of the economy. The political responsibility, however, remains with the Government as they set the target. As I said earlier, if the Monetary Policy Committee attempts to broaden its target, there will be problems if it comes into conflict with the Government.

Although there may be some short-term problems, in the long term the Government's policy will benefit manufacturing industry. Although increased interest rates and a high value of the pound may hurt in the short term, they will be worth it if they get inflation out of the system. We have to look for some short-term ways to help manufacturing industry during that process. The Government must make sure that it really is short-term pain and that it is over as quickly as possible. If the Monetary Policy Committee were in any way inclined to listen to my advice, I would encourage it to over-correct. Frankly, the quicker it is over with, the sooner interest rates will come down. We have to aim for stability.

We have had a brief debate about monetary policy and the European currency. Let me reiterate what I said in an earlier intervention. Low interest rates, low inflation and a competitive sterling are essential regardless of whether we join the European currency. I do not need to make up my mind about the euro until after the next election, when we can see what lies before us, and I justify my agnosticism on the ground that, whether one wants to enter the currency in the next five minutes—which I

[Dr. Ladyman]

believe would be foolish, given current circumstances—or whether one is determined never to enter it, the economic targets that one sets should be identical.

Mr. Cotter: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many people think that, if we committed ourselves to joining the single currency—or if we actually joined it—we would ensure low interest rates? To be agnostic is not very realistic.

Dr. Ladyman: I do not accept the argument that interest rates would magically fall if we announced that we were going to join the single currency tomorrow. It is far more likely that sterling and interest rates would be pickled at the levels that applied when we made the announcement, and there would be no further movement. Interest rates, inflation and the value of sterling must fall before we can join the euro.

To help manufacturing industry, we need to establish stability and—to use the Prime Minister's much-vaunted expression—to end boom and bust.

We need to continue to open up markets and to encourage the European Union to take the necessary steps to bring the east into the open market, although that can be financed only through a dramatic cut in the amount that is spent on the common agricultural policy.

We should also consider the grant aid that we provide to industry. There is an anomaly in the way in which we give grants to attract new industry into the various EU countries. The EU limits the amount that Governments can put into a new project to 30 per cent. of the capital cost, but it does not limit what non-governmental organisations can put into the pot. In France, for example, local authorities, chambers of commerce and others typically put in money over and above the Government's 30 per cent. of the capital cost, in the form of free factories or tax breaks to the inward investor for the foreseeable future. That creates an unlevel playing field.

The same happens in this country. In Wales and Scotland, development agencies can put money into the pot, as that money is not considered to be direct Government funding. My constituency is 80 per cent. in Thanet, which has full assisted area status, but we still find that we cannot compete with areas that receive extra money. There would be considerable savings if the EU limited the total investment from public sources in any new enterprise to 30 per cent. of the capital cost. Alternatively, grant aid could be made available only to inward investors from outside the EU, so that EU money is not used to fund companies that move round within Europe.

We should also consider grant aid for training. The Government's proposals on training assistance and on lifelong learning, together with the additional training money from the new deal, are essential in the short term to improve manufacturing industry.

I think that I am right in saying that, in the past few months, only one significant manufacturing company has gone bankrupt in my constituency. It did so not because of the high value of sterling—it traded only within the United Kingdom—but because of its cash-flow problems, which arose because larger companies had not paid their bills on time. That is why the Government's initiative on the late payment of debt is so important.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham said that one way in which to remove money from the economy would be to encourage savings—I entirely agree, which is why I believe that the Government's proposals on individual savings accounts are so vital. However, I do not know how he squares that with the fact that he seems to be encouraging building societies to demutualise, which should be complete anathema to someone who wants to encourage savings.

We must also create a proper framework for industrial harmony. The Government's policies on the minimum wage and fairness at work are vital to that; they will allow industrialists and manufacturers to plan for the future and to organise and manage their companies appropriately. Conservative Members sometimes seem to have spent too much time in boardrooms; if they had more experience of management below the level of the boardroom, they would know the importance of good industrial relations and appropriate trade union representation in the workplace.

We must ensure that we invest in industries in which we can really win. Britain has demonstrated that it leads the world in the biological, chemical, pharmaceutical, biotechnological and information technological sectors—other countries cannot compete with us—so I congratulate my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on announcing today a further £1.1 billion for science and technology.

Far from ignoring manufacturing and the problems that have been highlighted by hon. Members on both sides of the House, the Government have done a tremendous amount to help. They do not overlook the problems that have arisen; they are working on what needs to be corrected. They have certainly done more in the past one and a quarter years than was done in most of the years of the previous Conservative Government.

5.56 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I apologise to the House and to both Front-Bench spokesmen for being unavoidably detained and unable to hear the opening contributions.

This debate has arisen because the Chancellor wanted to hit the ground running. He has managed the first part; he has certainly hit the ground. The problem is that, when a Chancellor hits the ground, that is not a solo performance—a few million others join him in the crash.

That is not new, of course. I remember that, when I first came to the House some 22 years ago, Lord Healey, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, had run up inflation to more than 24 per cent. The dead were unburied, the rubbish was piling up in the streets and the International Monetary Fund had to come in like the cavalry rescuing a banana republic.

To show that I have no political bias, I should add that I remember that Lord Lawson, as Chancellor, created from a budget surplus an inflationary boom. Everyone went mad borrowing and spending money, and house prices went through the roof. Unfortunately, the inevitable reckoning coincided with a world recession, which made the bite that much more savage.

Despite what Labour Members say, the previous Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), created a virtuous circle—the

economy was moving in the right direction. Growth meant more employment, which meant more Government revenue, which meant that more money could be spent on social policy, which, in turn, fed through to further growth and employment.

Mr. Sheerman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Page: If the hon. Gentleman can contain his enthusiasm, I will let him have his threepence worth in a few seconds.

Every single month over the past three years, unemployment has come down—until now.

Mr. Sheerman: The real critics of the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), sit not on the Government but on the Opposition Benches; indeed, many of them sit on the Front Bench. The virtuous circle to which the hon. Gentleman referred was in many ways achieved.

Mr. Page: I do not join those who criticise my right hon. and learned Friend. He attracts that criticism by his enthusiasm for the euro.

I still do not know whether the Chancellor diagnosed the problem correctly. When he took over in May, with his enthusiasm for hitting the ground running—we will have more living proof of "legislate in haste and repent at leisure"—the general view was that the problem was that there was some froth in the high street that needed restraint. Inflation was occurring not in the manufacturing sector, but in the high street.

I have no objection to monetary policy being handed over to the Bank of England, but fiscal policy should not be operated completely independently and with a set of blinkers. The aeroplane analogy of the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) was interesting, but if one puts on too much flap and reduces the throttle while trying to keep the nose up, the plane will eventually fall out of the sky, and that is exactly what is happening at the moment.

Mr. Sheerman: Oh, come on.

Mr. Page: The hon. Gentleman may disagree, but I happen to know that that is exactly what happens if one does that in an aircraft. The Chancellor's reactions last year turned a small difficulty into a major problem. The so-called windfall tax was a smash-and-grab raid on the utilities. It seems to have been forgotten that the industries that the previous Government privatised cost the taxpayer £50 million a week when they were nationalised, and that an equivalent sum started coming into the Exchequer afterwards. That is one of the reasons why the Labour Government have suddenly become such converts to certain forms of privatisation.

The Government will have to face that problem with the Post Office. I cannot see the Post Office succeeding in the modern world without being set free from the shackles of Government. If we took note of other countries' practice in introducing commercial aspects to their post offices, we might reconsider our policies.

The Chancellor showed that the Government do not really care about manufacturing industry when he hit it with advance corporation tax. At the same time, interest rate rises were driving up the value of the pound and making it impossible for our manufacturers to compete abroad. The hon. Member for South Thanet made a couple of cracks about running businesses and Conservative Members' lack of experience. From my modicum of experience, I know that we can ask manufacturers to increase productivity by 4, 5 or 6 per cent. in a year—with effort, they can do that each year—but we cannot ask them to increase it by 30 per cent. in a single year. The extra blow to manufacturing this year has been the straw that broke the camel's back.

Hurting British manufacturers has made imports cheaper, which has contributed to the froth in the high street. If people spend more money on imports, the balance of payments suffers and it is that much harder to drive out inflation. The Bank of England has used its one stick—interest rates—time and time again. It has over-corrected, and should bring interest rates down faster than it put them up.

No one in the House would take any pleasure in the problematic state of the manufacturing sector of our economy. On that issue, we are all united. Nevertheless, despite Government Members' brave words, we can all see the worrying signs that manufacturing industry is facing serious difficulties. Output has fallen for the last two quarters for which figures have been published, and the survey to be published this week by the British Chambers of Commerce will show the severe impact of the strength of sterling on manufacturing exporters.

The Institute of Directors published a quarterly survey in June. It says:

"Our March survey showed a sharp fall in export orders, capacity utilisation and expected output growth; the June survey shows further weakening in those areas, together with a dramatic downturn in business optimism."

It continues in that gloomy tone.

Manufacturers in the west midlands are feeling the effects more keenly than practically anywhere else in the United Kingdom, and proper attention should be paid by the Government and by Parliament. Manufacturers' export order books have contracted sharply, and in the north-east of England orders are at their lowest since 1990. The hundreds of job losses announced by Pringle and Barbour in the north-east in the past fortnight are, I am sorry to say, being replicated in textile firms in such places as Bradford and Scotland, and in engineering firms on the Humber.

The state of manufacturing is much better in other areas, such as the south-east, where the financial services sector is much more important, and the south-west; but even in those two regions there are recruitment bottlenecks and the first signs of a slowdown in activity. It will be surprising if Britain does not experience a prolonged period of slow economic growth and rising unemployment, whatever measures are introduced.

The consequences can easily be predicted. An unemployment rise will inevitably increase the tensions between employers, who will try to contain their costs, and employees, who will obviously want to maintain their salary levels. There will be some industrial unrest. One does not have to be Ed Balls to see that. The new culture of partnership between employer and trade union that the President of the Board of Trade commended to the House in her White Paper on fairness at work will inevitably be undermined.

[Mr. Page]

I have always found it hard to understand how good industrial relations can be ensured by legislative proposals *to give unions unnecessary privileges.* The Government have created problems for themselves. The requirements placed on employers by their minimum wage proposals will increase wages and wage costs, if for no other reason than that people will want to maintain differentials. It will be more difficult to generate new employment opportunities.

Hon. Members on the Government Benches will have heard the general secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, Mr. Ken Jackson, call on the Bank of England to end its war of attrition against manufacturing industry, and to lower interest rates. That call has been made in the House, and it will be made many times more. The Government tell us, and will tell us again, that the economy is heading for a soft landing. I recall a former Chancellor prophesying green shoots, but they took a long time to come. It may also be some time before that soft landing occurs.

Decisions must be taken if Britain is to get back on track to sustainable long-term growth. The Chancellor of the Exchequer assured us in *The Times* last Friday that the right decisions had been taken. He is reverting to the type of Labour Chancellors by repeating their traditional incantation about the danger of excessive wages.

Mr. Redwood: The Government forecast a soft landing on average, which means a crash landing for manufacturing, and no landing at all for high fliers on their side.

Mr. Page: My right hon. Friend proves the point that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. Averages always mean someone is at the top, but someone else is equally far from the average at the bottom.

Incantations about the dangers of private sector wage rises unfortunately follow a rate of inflation already well above the Government's 2.5 per cent. target. Public expenditure will also increase by 2.75 per cent. on top of inflation over the next three years. and that will mean substantial growth in the burden of taxation, beyond the economy's growth rate.

The traditional features of Labour Government are high public spending that is growing faster than the economy, rising inflation, declining manufacturing and the prospect of rising unemployment. I have been through that before in the late 1970s, and I have a feeling of deja vu. I doubt that even Mr. Derek Draper—if he were ever released back on to the circuit—would be able to spin the Labour party out of that problem and the political unpopularity that will result. It would be better for the Government to admit now to the truth of my analysis, but I doubt that they will do so. I doubt, too, whether Labour Back Benchers could bring themselves to do so.

A play in the 1960s called "The Company Way" sums up the position of Labour Members, in the words:

"I play it the government way. Where the government puts me, there I'll stay . . . I have no point of view. Whatever the government thinks, I think so too."

Mrs. Dunwoody: Author?

Mr. Sheerman: Author?

Mr. Page: Not me.

Not surprisingly, that play folded after a few weeks. Unfortunately, the Government have a few years to go, and we will all suffer from what they did in their first Budget in June 1997.

The previous Government, of which I was proud to be a member, were committed to promoting competition, to improving the quality of production and to restoring our country's national pride in manufacturing. We succeeded in raising the national level of output after 1992, and in recording significant gains in productivity, especially between 1994 and 1997. Not many hon. Members seem to understand that if the number of units on a production line is reduced by 10 per cent. or 20 per cent., profit does not drop by only that amount. Standing costs remain, and the cut in production bites into the company's success. A company that cannot keep up growth goes out of business.

A small downturn has devastating effects on companies. That is why it is necessary to have stability in the economy. Manufacturers need to plan ahead for 10 or 15 years to recoup their capital costs. Companies cannot expect an 80 per cent. jump in annual turnover to save the day. They do not make that sort of money, but deal in small percentages, and that is why stability is necessary.

When we were in government, there was, for the first time, a major growth in manufacturing exports. Our industrial relations record had never been better. Sadly, the golden legacy we left for the new Government in May 1997 has been put at risk. The difficulties being faced by the economy as a whole and by manufacturing in particular cannot be solved by some Calvinistic injunction to be good when those who make that injunction are gambling with the country.

Harry Truman, the former American President, got it right when he said that it is a recession when a neighbour loses his job, but a depression when you lose your own. For too many people in manufacturing, the recession is already here. For some Ministers, the depression is only a few days away, but for the rest, it is just a matter of time.

6.15 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I have been disappointed by some of what I have heard, particularly from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). I was delighted when the Opposition chose to spend half a day on manufacturing. It seemed a wonderful opportunity for a serious debate about the fundamental problems of manufacturing. However, his speech dwelt wholly on the surface, scoring points and making political jibes. His analysis was very superficial—he is good at that. What irritated me most was that the fundamental problems of our country are worth talking about seriously.

The right hon. Gentleman sometimes chides people like me who represent industrial constituencies—Huddersfield is certainly an industrial constituency—for not speaking up for industrialists. The way to do that, however, is to examine changing patterns in the global economy and how our industrial and manufacturing sectors fit in. If we could dwell on that, the debate would be much more useful.

Mr. Redwood: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recollect that I set out a six-point programme to improve

matters for manufacturers. Does he agree that, unless something is done pretty soon about interest rates and exchange rates, a lot more manufacturing will close?

Mr. Sheerman: The right hon. Gentleman knows that we must deal with global economic problems. Unprecedented change has occurred in the world economy over the past five years. Sometimes, I hear Alistair Cooke, now in his 80s, on my radio on a Sunday morning giving his in-depth analysis of the global economy and its effects on the United States and Europe. He is a man of great experience who is capable of squeezing into eight minutes—the BBC, yet again, has cut him back—the core of a matter. In a recent programme, he spoke about the fact that the global economy has become a reality in his lifetime. People used to talk about it; now it is here.

The crisis in south-east Asia is wide-ranging. We can wish it away, or pretend it does not exist. We can pretend to carry on as if it were of little significance, but it is a large change in the global economy. We are still facing up to it, and there will be worse to come. The United Kingdom must be seen in that light, and in relation to other instabilities. I am pro-European and, given the right measures and proper caution, I am in principle in favour of joining the European single currency, but there is some instability in the European Union.

We face a flight from the deutschmark to the pound and the dollar. One ray of sunshine is the American economy, whose tenacity and vibrancy is coupled with the ability to reinvent itself. We must learn some lessons from the American example and consider our economy in the context of real changes throughout the world.

I am something of an historian, so I must return to what I regard as a seminal work in terms of how we view British manufacturing and industry. In 1993, the London business school and IBM produced a consultancy report entitled "The True State of British Industry". That report changed everyone's mind about the state of British business. Until then, many people had thought that British business was pretty damn good and that we should continue to do what we had always done. Bad times were blamed on inflation, the exchange rate and many other factors, and the consensus was that there was nothing really wrong with British business and management.

Using a set of criteria, "The True State of British Industry" presented the facts. It revealed that between 1 per cent. and 1.5 per cent. of British companies were world class and that, if superhuman efforts were expended, 38 per cent. of British companies could become world class. That meant a hell of a lot of changes. According to the report, 60 per cent. of British industry was hardly saveable. It predicted that most companies would disappear and no longer be real players in the British economy.

That seminal work changed hearts and minds in the Conservative party, in the Labour party and in British business. As President of the Board of Trade, the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), produced competitiveness White Papers that attempted to address those problems. The way in which the Labour party regarded business and the problems facing it changed totally. The report probably changed the Liberal Democrats also—although I know less about their thinking. It changed us all, and so it should.

At the same time, there were other changes in management. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, of which many of us are fellows, took up the challenge. Some 25 chief executives and chairmen of blue-chip companies spent two and a half years analysing what constituted a "tomorrow's company": a company that would survive into the next century and beyond while remaining a vigorous player. Many of the great companies that were listed in "Fortune" 500 a year ago, are no longer there. They have not survived: they have been taken over or gone out of business. The "tomorrow's company" philosophy and tool kit was extremely valuable because it represented an attempt to learn lessons from world-class companies so that the nation could start addressing the problems.

Five years later, the British manufacturing economy has not come to terms with that challenge. There have been some improvements, but not enough. I was slightly amused by the comments by my old friend the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page)—we have been on opposing sides for so long that I think of him as a friend; although not an hon. Friend—who said that the previous Government increased exports. If someone devalues the currency by 30 per cent. and does not improve manufacturing export performance, God help us. Yet that is what occurred.

Manufacturing benefited from coming out of the exchange rate mechanism and from a massive devaluation. British business had a very cosy time—in fact, it was a bit too cosy. British companies did not have the urge to change into more efficient and productive industries. When the German economy was faced with a highly valued deutschmark, business used the time to retain and expand its market share by examining the quality of management and over-all manufacturing capacity. German manufacturing increased productivity in circumstances similar to those we face at present, and improved its market share.

Mr. Page: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said. However, does he accept that, the last time there was a devaluation, we started to fight our way back in volumes of sales and in growth of manufacturing exports and productivity? We did not look to devalue our way out of the crisis, as we had done time after time. Last time, it was different: we cracked the failings of the past and embarked upon a virtuous cycle. A Government reshuffle is imminent, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman's manufacturing expertise is recognised with a place on the Front Bench.

Mr. Sheerman: I shall respond not to the second but to the first point. The hon. Gentleman raises some interesting issues. I thought that he was arguing against an independent central bank. The fact of the matter is—let us not be party political about this—that Britain's record, under all parties, in handling its currency has been a disgrace. We got into trouble with high long-term interest rates because we did not have a bank and a currency that we could trust. Rather than take tough decisions on the economy, every Government devalued the currency. That was true of both major parties in government.

In the first few days of this Administration, the Chancellor took the bold and imaginative step of ending all that. He sought to ensure that we have a currency that

[Mr. Sheerman]

people can trust. I remember visiting the Bank of England three or four years ago and I was amazed when the Governor, Eddie George, said, "Until we came out of the ERM, the Bank of England didn't have a vision statement; we just did what we did. Afterwards, we produced a vision statement that said that we should have a sound currency, low inflation and a climate in which business can thrive." I assume that the Bank of England has retained that vision statement.

Mr. Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the technicians have won and the Bank has had its way on two occasions in the 20th century: first, in relation to the gold standard; and, secondly, in relation to ERM? Those moves ended in massive job losses and manufacturing haemorrhage. Is the hon. Gentleman at all concerned that the current experiment might end the same way?

Mr. Sheerman: When I hear the right hon. Gentleman speak, I am often reminded of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who is an expert at plucking two dates from history and making an historical case. That is the worst sort of historical analysis. The right hon. Gentleman is just like my right hon. Friend, although he does not write or speak so much about historical subjects. One cannot conduct an analysis in that way. We must analyse what has happened to our currency, and trust in that currency over a long period.

I have recently been described in several columns as a "parliamentary poodle"—I have never viewed myself in that way—but that is one decision that I believe is good for the economy. The vision statement of the Bank of England must be correct: businesses seek security. They want to know that they are operating in a stable environment. We have not had that in this country for a long time. Stability counts; it is crucial.

Sir David Madel: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's comments. There is no stability for industry if interest rates continue to rise when they should not. That does not do anything for industry.

Mr. Sheerman: I am not going to speak much longer, but I intervened on the right hon. Member for Wokingham on interest rates, for which I have figures back to 1950. We are still in a very low interest economy compared with most of the time under the Administrations of which he was part, when they reached 11, 13 and 14 per cent. The only time that interest rates have neared present levels was in the almighty recession of the early 1990s. The tragedy is that we have been a high-interest economy. That has been a tax all the time on my industrialists in Huddersfield and on our manufacturing sector.

We must achieve long-term low inflation and low interest. That is the secret. That is what Germany and the United States are better at. Looking at our motion, that is exactly what is crucial. It is sometimes tough and I feel terribly sorry about that. This morning, I was at John Brierley, a 100-year-old cotton spinning company in my constituency. It is finding it tough and I have every sympathy, but our motion is about securing our economy for the long term. Too many politicians in this country have been obsessed with the short term. The Tories do not like it because we have gone for the long term. Sometimes it hurts in the short term to get it right in the long term. That is why I shall support the Government in the Lobby and why I think overall that the pattern set now is right for British industry and manufacturing.

6.30 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): This is a serious issue which Members of Parliament do not treat at one remove. Many of us have personally experienced the consequences of six hikes in interest rates and the inconvenience of getting to work through tube strikes. Those of us who remember the winter of discontent—I often remind myself that not all of us now remember it, even in this place—look out on this rather drenched summer, for which I do not blame the Government, and see the signs of a strong and growing industrial El Niño effect, for which I do blame them. The debate has been eloquent in showing the widespread concern about manufacturing industry. That says a lot, even if our prescriptions differ on how to deal with it.

I and many other Conservative Members have a strong commitment to raising our competitiveness through better education and training, to the practice of good industrial relations and to the success of manufacturing industry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and others deployed powerful arguments. Several of my right hon. and hon. Friends have distinguished records on the subject.

It is interesting that new Labour has been rather absent from the debate and unable to say how well things were going. *[Interruption.]* It appears to be getting its messages now. Whereas until recently new Labour has been in denial, the argument that it is all the fault of the last 18 years of Conservative government is rapidly running out of road. The time is coming when the Labour Government will have to stand up and be counted and be accountable for their actions in respect of manufacturing.

Mr. MacShane: Does the hon. Gentleman recall an Opposition day debate this Parliament that was so poorly attended by Conservative Back Benchers?

Mr. Boswell: I recall that many of my hon. Friends were here for the introduction of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham. I have the impression that many others—not, of course, because of my contribution—are hurrying to the Chamber even now.

I want to talk not so much about manufacturing industry as about industrial relations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham made some telling points about the problems. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) referred extensively in his interesting speech to the problems of the engineering industry. He took the words out of my mouth on that, so I confine myself to noting that hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. King) and I met the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry to discuss problems in the large power generation plant industry that affect employment in my constituency. Those are not the only problems.

In a letter to me enclosing its business survey, the Institute of Directors refers to

"a dramatic collapse in business optimism".

with an especially abrupt fall in the manufacturing industry. The 3Is barometer survey of business confidence is at its lowest level since 1992. "Office World" is often quoted by DTI Ministers. Its quarterly small business survey announces:

"Warning signs from small businesses—Government's honeymoon over".

Professor Robert Blackburn heads the small business research centre at Kingston university. He concludes: "The signs are ominous."

The question before the House is what is the sensible action for a responsible Government at such a time. We understand that macro-economic management is difficult—as many hon. Members have conceded, it has been difficult for Governments of all colours—but what do we do about it, given that it is difficult? There are undoubted problems. Should not we be doing everything possible to avoid heaping greater burdens on industry? Such burdens might arise through taxation, additional regulation or industrial action frustrating management. The three together are increasingly adding up to a noxious brew.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer warns companies about their earnings record while imposing a cool £25 billion of extra taxation over the Parliament on business alone. The Monetary Policy Committee is in agonies trying to balance its inflation targets with the consequences for manufacturing industry in particular. Businesses and trade unions, well aware of the likely score, are trying to get their retaliation in first. That is well exemplified by the industrial strain in London Transport today.

On industrial strain, we had some revealing figures in the exchanges with the President of the Board of Trade. She is not here to answer the point, but she sought, somewhat disingenuously, to compare a series of figures about our record in the 1980s with figures that I gave on the Labour record in the 1970s. What is incontestable is that industrial relations are very much better than they were when the last Labour Government left office. That is well shown by the fact that, in 1979, 29 million days were lost; by 1994—the figures are little worse now—only 1 per cent. of that number were lost. I am delighted that we are on the verge of solving the industrial relations problem. The question is whether the Government's proposals help or hinder the process. In almost every respect, they are likely to make matters considerably worse.

Let us kick off with the minimum wage, which, as the Minister knows, has been extensively debated. At least we now have the report of the Low Pay Commission. There is the interesting question of the impact of the minimum wage on business costs. The commission estimates the direct impact at 0.6 per cent. To that must be added the entirely unquantified impact on differentials, which may not be too great because of the figure chosen, which has been further doctored down by the Chancellor because of the concern that he raised in his arguments with the DTI.

Be that as it may, the minimum wage is not the only leg of the stool, because we go on to "Fairness at Work", which the Minister, in fairness, sees as a major part of his proposals. We have had the recognition debate, and we found that the Confederation of British Industry had got its way on the 40 per cent. hurdle, but there had to be many concessions, and, even at 40 per cent., there is still plenty of leverage for those who want to make disputes to ensure that they happen.

Perhaps more serious than the recognition figure is the impact of the unfair dismissal proposals. In particular, I draw the House's attention to the fact that it is likely to poke up the route of recourse through employment tribunal on grounds of unfair dismissal with no limit on damages, in comparison with a more legally based claim of wrongful dismissal, which is confined to the contract term.

Finally, there are several interesting and important issues relating to representation that the Government have not properly addressed. For example, it is even possible to allow for a disaffected employee to drag in the representative of one trade union when another trade union is recognised. That will increase the possibility of inter-union disputes like those of the 1970s, which we had thought we could now forget.

My first criticism of the change that is taking place is that it is all about litigation and using litigation for recourse, rather than being in line with the spirit of the all-party approved private Member's legislation to resolve disputes, wherever possible, by consensus, arbitration or agreement.

Secondly—as I warned the Minister of State—I was staggered when I engaged in correspondence with him and asked, innocently enough, what the compliance costs were of his proposals on "Fairness at Work", but, so far, answer have I none at all. We shall have to continue asking.

As if the minimum wage and "Fairness at Work" were not enough, there are several other measures in the pipeline. There is the implementation of the working time directive, which is supposed to be introduced on 1 October. There is a slight problem, in that the regulations have not been published. How can firms be expected to comply with, to implement or to prepare to implement regulations that are not yet in existence if they do not know what they are to contain?

Above and beyond that, there is the implementation of an avalanche of European directives, some arising out of the social chapter, including those relating to works councils, parental leave, and part-time working, and the revision of the assured rights directive. Together, those all lead in one direction: they offer rights without further responsibilities, impose further costs on business and, therefore, concomitantly reduce employment opportunities. Taken together, they are bad news for business.

Yesterday, I visited an important showcase for British industry, the Silverstone grand prix circuit, which is shared between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), although mine contains the grandstand, the start, the finish and the pits. I mention it not only because it is a remarkable example of what this country can achieve through its inventiveness, but because it is an analogy for competition. There is a range of grand prix cars which, to my untutored eye, all look the same; they may be painted rather differently, but they all have multiple and complex names and they all go extremely fast—far faster than I would choose to go. The actual difference between them in terms of performance is only 1 or 2 per cent., but that is everything; that is what the whole industry is based on. If we want to be competitive, it is no good saying, "We can take a little rubbish from 'Fairness at Work' and a few extra costs in taxation," because those small things can silt up the whole process and choke it.

[Mr. Boswell]

The President of the Board of Trade, who has now rejoined us, is deemed to be irrelevant by some of her colleagues, so we can leave her out of the analogy. However, when I consider the position of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and which analogy I should apply to their attitude to British industry, I am drawn irresistibly to that of the oysters in "The Walrus and the Carpenter", or, to bring it up to date in new Labour speak, the plumber and the leaker, whichever is which. The House will recall that

"the Walrus said:

'I deeply sympathise.' . . .

But answer came there none";

as the House will remember, the reason was,

"They'd eaten every one"

We do not believe that the situation of British industry and manufacturing industry is irredeemable. Tonight, we are trying to save the Government from the follies of their own policies. In an effort to do so, we have tabled our motion and we shall press it to a Division.

6.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): First, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) and for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) for both the content of their speeches and the enthusiasm for Government policy that they expressed.

I understand that, on the right occasion, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) enjoys a Big Mac. Let me tell him that I am one Big Mac that he will not be devouring tonight. His speech evoked a sense of deja vu; one would have thought that the Conservative crew had never been in government, or left an inheritance for Labour to clear up.

Under the Conservatives' tutelage and during their period of responsibility, 2.5 million manufacturing jobs were lost. They discouraged investment in manufacturing, to the extent that investment grew by only 0.5 per cent. per annum. The value of manufacturing imports exceeded that of exports by more than £100 billion. Among manufacturing companies, insolvencies quadrupled under the previous Government. Like the electorate, industry wants an end to those disastrous policies. It wants an end to instability, which our policies are designed to achieve.

Today, Dun and Bradstreet reported that manufacturers now expect a growth in sales, orders, profits and employment; that is a radically different view from that expressed by Conservative Members. The Institute of Directors reports three quarters of manufacturers performing well or very well. More than twice as many manufacturers expect to increase investment as expect to cut it. That is not a sign of a Government's policies in crisis. Many other independent forecasters, including the Confederation of British Industry, expect manufacturing output to grow both this year and next.

The Opposition have tabled a spurious motion on recession and a crisis in employment relations. The right hon. Member for Wokingham has been unable to give a single, sustainable, fact-based argument that the problems that the Labour Government are now tackling are not the legacy left by him and his right hon. Friends.

The right hon. Gentleman has a bit of a reputation for economic forecasting. In 1989, he said:

"all about us there is manifold evidence of growth in prosperity, capital investment, and the like."—[*Official Report*, 12 January 1989; Vol. 144, c. 1072.]

Within in a year, we had embarked on the longest recession for 50 years. Two days earlier, in a similar debate, he had gone one better by saying:

"About one third of the unemployed in Britain are in London, the south-east and East Anglia, and in all those parts of the country it is possible to find a job. One has only to walk down the high street to see the jobs on offer. They almost fall out of the shops."—[*Official Report*, 10 January 1989; Vol. 144, c. 748.]

Within four years of that remark, unemployment had risen from 1.8 million to 3 million. Economic forecasting is not one of the right hon. Gentleman's strongest skills. He apologised for the 1990s, but, like some Rip van Winkle, he appears to have forgotten that the Conservative Government were in control of the economy during the 1980s as well. I hope that he does not mind my saying that he debates economic issues as effectively as he sings the Welsh national anthem.

Mr. Redwood: To say that there are many jobs available at a particular time is not to make a forecast for four years hence. What has the Minister to say about the headline of the "Business Day" section in the *Evening Standard* tonight, which says:

"Rid us of Beckett and restore morale at the DTI"?

The article contains a long catalogue of complaints about ineptitude, inadequacy and failure to make decisions that business needs. Will the Minister get in touch with business and understand that there is a serious crisis?

Mr. McCartney: The right hon. Gentleman should stop overdosing on Viagra. He is over-excited. One point is absolutely certain—my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade and other Ministers in the Department have proved since the first day of this Government that we are effective not only individually but collectively. We are one of the best Departments in the Government. Under the previous Government, job insecurity was rife, but I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend and I do not suffer from it.

The right hon. Gentleman alleged that we had made a £25 billion tax raid on companies. The Government will cut corporate tax bills by £4.5 billion, and we have cut corporation tax by a full 3 per cent. That is the lowest ever rate in the UK and the lowest of any major industrialised country. We have cut corporation tax twice and increased capital allowances for small firms; we have cut capital gains tax on long-term investment; we have cut taxes for working families on low incomes; we have cut national insurance contributions on employment; we have cut VAT on fuel from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent.

The election of a Labour Government has prevented further Tory tax increases such as VAT on food, children's clothes, books, newspapers and fares.

Mr. Redwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: The right hon. Gentleman should quit while he is ahead, but I shall give way.

Mr. Redwood: If the Government have made all those cuts in business taxes, why does the Chancellor's Red Book show a £25,000 million increase in the business tax burden?

Mr. McCartney: That is related to growth in the economy. The Government are directly reducing taxes for business.

I shall concede one point to the right hon. Gentleman: the Government have introduced one tax—the windfall tax—and I am proud of that. The previous Government allowed privatised utilities to make bumper profits while unemployment among young people and older workers increased to the point at which there was mass unemployment everywhere in Britain. We introduced a windfall tax to fund the new deal. I am proud of that, and the public are proud of it. The new deal is seen as one of the most successful programmes for introducing, at last, training and work opportunities for young people and older workers. The previous Government abandoned them year after year.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) spoke about employment relations. Looking back at the inheritance that we received when we came into office, we can see that, shamefully, under the previous Government, the International Labour Organisation listed the UK, along with Burma, as a country that was imposing limitations on workers' rights to the extent that we were not complying with our international obligations—Burma, I ask you. That is a regime known for its cruelty to all its citizens. We were bracketed with that country for our lack of compliance with ILO conventions.

The previous Government abolished wages councils, denying more than 2 million workers protection against poverty pay. They burdened the tribunal system with huge delays because of the increasing number of people who felt that they had been unfairly treated in the workplace. They systematically failed to work with trade unions and listen to their views.

The previous Government were even taken to the European Court. The former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), had a record as long as his arm of losing cases in the European Court for denying British people their rights. The man was a scandal and, if it had not been for the election, he would probably have been locked up because of his long record of failure to comply with the law.

Believe it or not, the previous Government went to court and lost because they did not want the lowest-paid workers in Britain to have three weeks' paid holiday—four weeks by the turn of the century. That is the previous Government's record, which we had to follow.

The hon. Member for Daventry raised the issue of today's rail strikes. The previous Government lost almost 900,000 working days in transport and communications in their last year of office. None of us wants strikes. The whole purpose of partnership is to reduce conflict in the workplace. The previous Government had a clear record of policies that led to substantial numbers of days being lost through industrial action in the rail industry.

Mr. Boswell: Will the Minister tell the House whether the rail union is today striking against the policies of the previous Conservative Government or those of the present Labour Government?

Mr. McCartney: The position is clear—the hon. Gentleman left us a legacy of under-investment, poor industrial relations and a demoralised work force. It has been left to this Government to start investing to clear up the results of their policies.

Opposition Members do not believe in partnership, but they are very isolated. Even Sir Stanley Kalms, the Tory party's biggest fund raiser, announced last week a recognition arrangement between his company and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union. Levi Strauss, United Distillers, PowerGen, Tesco and Lucas are all making similar moves. Across Britain, employers are moving towards partnership and fairness in the workplace. Only the Conservatives, wedded to the past of under-cutting and under-resourcing people in the workplace, do not believe in partnership and a joint approach to solving employment problems. They do not believe in trade unions having the right to exist in the workplace. They do not believe that unions are good for partnership.

Our White Paper has pledged funds to contribute to the training of managers and employee representatives to assist and develop partnerships at work. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced a £2 million fund for union learning to support innovation in promoting learning and skills at work and to stimulate new partnerships. Would the Conservative party reverse that policy? Would it repeal the "Fairness at Work" White Paper proposals for funds to improve training and education in partnership for managers and employees? Would the right hon. Member for Wokingham withdraw funding for better relationships in the workplace? Would he repeal the proposals to give people the right to paid holidays? If he opposes those proposals, will he state whether the Conservatives, if they ever won an election, would repeal those new rights?

People are sick and tired of the Tories' old agenda. They want to move towards partnership in the workplace. That is why "Fairness at Work" has been overwhelmingly accepted. The right hon. Member for Wokingham has been waxing lyrical about why, even now, he opposes a minimum wage of £3.60, but he had to admit, under pressure, that he has a part-time job paying £12,000. Will he confirm that he has also been given 100,000 share options for a part-time job? He opposes a national minimum wage of just over £7,000 for someone who is working full time. He is guilty of double standards and hypocrisy.

We need no lessons from the right hon. Gentleman about the importance of establishing a minimum wage. Will he fight the next election on wage cuts by pledging to remove the right to a national minimum wage? I am giving the right hon. Gentleman the opportunity to answer. Will he oppose the continuation of the national minimum wage at the next election, possibly forcing wage cuts on many low-paid workers?

Mr. Redwood: The Minister has often asked that, and I have always given him a clear answer. We shall review all Labour's measures just before the next election and decide what is right for this country in the interests of more people having opportunities and jobs. We are not against decent wages; we are against people losing their jobs through ill-thought-out legislation.

Mr. McCartney: The right hon. Gentleman's reply is very interesting. All women workers in Britain now understand that the Conservative party will review their new rights as part-time workers, their rights to parental leave and their improved maternity rights. The right hon.

[Mr. McCartney]

Gentleman's statement shows that, by the next election, the Conservatives will have learnt nothing from the previous election, and that they are prepared to undermine people's entitlements in the workplace. Every worker in Britain—all 25 million of them—should realise that, at the next election, the Conservatives' policy will be to remove the entitlements and rights that were given by this Government. That is a disgraceful position for the Conservatives to place themselves in.

We have said in our White Paper that we shall reduce from two years to one year the qualifying time for protection against unfair dismissal. Will the right hon. Gentleman say whether he intends to remove that right and return the qualifying time to two years? Does he accept that, under the previous Government's proposals, many workers were undermined by their employers and could not gain access to arrangements to prevent them from being treated unfairly in the workplace? Does he intend to reverse our decision, which has been accepted by the overwhelming majority of British industry? Will he be isolated again and fight the election on the basis that workers will be able to be undermined by unfair practice in the workplace?

In *The House* magazine of 19 December, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"I knew that in the end I wanted to be able to make my own statements and live and die by my own remarks."

By his own remarks today, he has died a thousand deaths. Let us make sure that we give him a decent burial in the Lobby and reject the motion.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 134, Noes 313.

Division No. 333] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berrningham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain

Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Ms Bridget Prentice and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the measures the Government has taken to build an economy which is healthy and sustainable in the long term, including placing the control of interest rates with the independent Bank of England; notes that over the last 12 months investment has grown by 7 per cent., 14,000 manufacturing jobs have been created and the public finances have been put in order; welcomes the new culture of partnership in industrial relations which is developing within the framework of measures and proposals the Government is taking forward; urges the Government to continue its own productive partnership with both business and employees; and condemns the Opposition for its own record in government of allowing manufacturing to decline within a boom and bust economy of unprecedented proportions and actively and sustainedly destroying partnership and democracy in the workplace.

Department of Social Security

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I have to tell the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.13 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I beg to move,

That this House deeply regrets the Government's failure to meet their election pledges to reduce social security costs; believes that this is a direct result of incompetent leadership at the Department of Social Security which has created confusion, contradictory policies and delays and has wasted their first year in Government.

Fourteen months into this Parliament, I and all my colleagues believe that the time is ripe for a review of the progress made by the Government and their Ministers in the Department of Social Security. *[Interruption.]* I knew that the Secretary of State would agree with me; I always set out to be helpful.

Today, we shall simply judge the Government, and the Secretary of State and her Ministers, by their own rhetoric and targets; we shall not invent any for them, but simply go by the ones that they set themselves. I and my colleagues want to see what has become of the Prime Minister's promise that Labour would be

"the party of welfare reform,"

that it would

"design a modern welfare state based on rights and duties going together",

and that, ultimately, it would reduce dependency and spending. Those were the promises. Have the Labour Government achieved them, or have they achieved instead incompetence and political inertia? Those are the two charges against them.

Perhaps first we may deal with the charge of incompetence. I shall list some examples of the escalating levels of incompetence at the DSS which have occurred during the past 14 months. Perhaps we could start with the winter fuel payment scheme, which sums up that charge almost as well as any other. The Government spent nearly £1.7 million on an advertising campaign—some £850,000 on the television advertisement alone.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: In a minute.

Yet pensioners were to receive those payments automatically, so the campaign was unnecessary. With pictures of cheques dropping through letter-boxes, the advertising campaign only made it worse. Pensioners were encouraged to believe, and actually believed—when I went around talking to them, many that I met certainly did—that they would receive those payments without having to do anything about it.

Mr. Hope *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: I shall give way in a minute.

However, the majority of pensioners collected theirs through the post office, and the advertisement took no account of that reality. Of those lucky enough to receive the cheques, more than 40,000 were sent cheques that bounced because they were out of date. Then, more than 9,000 of those cheques were sent to those who did not even qualify—more than 1,000 of whom were in local authority residential care.

The pressure that the Government put on officials to get things done in a hurry was largely responsible for that problem. Officials that I have met in many of the Benefits Agency offices that I have visited around the country have complained and commented adversely about that.

In May, it was revealed that as many as 100,000 cheques were still to be collected at post offices.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): How many pensioners?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I said 100,000; perhaps the hon. Gentleman's ears need clearing out.

Many pensioners had probably been misled by the advertisements and were still waiting for the cheques to drop through the letter-box. They continued to wait.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: In a moment.

There are also serious question marks over the selection of the advertising agency. Although the agency had been used by the DSS previously, when my colleagues were in government, the difference is that the present Government must have been aware at the time when they placed the campaign that the Labour party had an account with that agency. Why not, then, prevent speculation about why they placed that contract, by going out to competitive tender? They did no such thing. In fact, most interesting of all, they decided to place it without such a tendering process; I believe that it leaves them vulnerable to another charge of cronyism. It links very nicely with what has been going on over the weekend, and a certain amount of "cronygate".

Mr. Hanson: Instead of nit-picking and carping about some of the issues, will the hon. Gentleman tell the House straight: does he support the giving of that fuel grant in the first place? That is what pensioners in my constituency are interested in: the fuel grant received on their doorsteps, in their wage packets, in their bills, paying for those winter heating bills.

Mr. Duncan Smith: That is, of course, if they received them and were able to cash them. I must say to the hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Hanson: Does the hon. Gentleman support winter payments?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am just about to answer that. In due course, I shall make some very serious charges about this wasted year, when policy has gone missing. In reply to the question of whether we support this, my simple answer is that I would support anything that improves and increases—*[Interruption.]* Wait a minute. I would support anything that improves and increases the income of pensioners, provided that the Government who do so can afford it. The question remains, can the Government now afford what they are promising

pensioners? I shall come to that in a second. I believe that the hon. Gentleman will have less to say on that in due course.

I have left the subject of cronyism and the poor way in which the Government have handled the process of paying pensioners winter fuel payments, but there are many other examples of incompetence. *[Interruption.]* If the Secretary of State would keep quiet for a second, she might learn some things about how matters have been mishandled throughout the past 14 months by her.

For example, in December 1997, the Secretary of State—the same one who seems intent on making comments from a sedentary position—was the first for more than 20 years not to make the uprating statement in the Chamber, or to speak in the uprating debate. That debate is possibly the single most important thing that happens to the Social Security Department in the year—and she did not come to the House. She sent someone else—two different people, in fact. They were the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), a junior Minister; and the Minister of State.

In September, the DSS head of information, Steve Reardon, was axed by the same Secretary of State. Apparently, the Secretary of State removed him because he could not read her mind. At first, she seemed to be for a Cabinet pay rise. Then, when the Chancellor expressed the opinion that he was not for a Cabinet pay rise, it appears that the Secretary of State was not for a Cabinet pay rise. Mr. Reardon, a long-standing civil servant held in high regard, apparently could not cope with the pace of Government U-turns. He could check what they were doing, he could follow the turn, but not that quickly, when it happened almost the same day.

However, firing the messenger is not the answer, and spin is not the solution. In November and December, a number of leaks revealed that the Government intended to cut disability benefit and introduce a tax on child benefit. Those leaks continued, with plenty of opportunity for the Secretary of State or her Ministers to say that they were rubbish.

In the new year, the Secretary of State caused unnecessary concern by again floating the idea of an affluence test—I believe that that was when the Prime Minister was in Japan—including the proposal to means-test the basic state pension. Originally the Government were quite keen on the idea of an affluence test but, suddenly, they thought that it would be unpopular, so the Secretary of State was instructed by Downing street to issue a denial. That served to highlight yet again the confusion at the heart of Government.

Mr. Hope: There is nothing to do with social security contributions in that speech. Does the hon. Gentleman's party support the winter fuel payments that this Government introduced? Can he confirm that he would support the increase in child benefit? Those are two substantial welfare reform measures that this Government have introduced in this Parliament.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I see that the Whips' messengers are out in force. I have already answered that question. If the hon. Gentleman was not listening, that is his problem. He should try to pay attention.

I shall press on. In February and March, the Government were forced into a series of face-saving concessions to try to salvage the benefit integrity project. The handling of that project provoked yet another rebuke from Downing street and also from Lord Ashley, the chairman of the all-party disablement group.

Then, the Secretary of State claimed with authority that there were women earning £1 million a year who claimed as much as £18,000 a week in maternity benefits. When journalists challenged that, the DSS had to explain the use of that figure. The Department replied:

"it's a spurious figure, but it's one she uses to make her point. Like a lot of figures we give, it doesn't reflect real life."

The Secretary of State might like to carve that on her Dispatch Box. Perhaps it is a motto that she will take away with her. That is an absurd counter-statement from her own Department, when the Secretary of State uses figures that do not add up.

Of course, there was the Secretary of State's mishandling of the reform of lone parent benefits. Few of us will ever forget the Secretary of State cutting a lonely figure on the Front Bench in December, with no Cabinet colleague to give her support and her own Back Benchers angry about her change of heart on a policy that she had condemned before, and adopted after, the election.

The reason was simply costs. The Chancellor refused to budge. Not once in the run-up to that debate did the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister speak about the principle of the change. They talked about the cost and the need to stay within the budgets that they had inherited—never the principle.

In January, the Government started their road shows. The public were vetted, and only those who were members of the Labour party were allowed to attend. When Labour party members became too troublesome, only those who were good members of the Labour party could come to the road shows. Eventually, even the Secretary of State was not allowed to attend. It was only at the road shows that the Government started to talk tentatively about the principle. Perhaps the Secretary of State would like to give her opinion and tell us whether she supports principle or cost-saving.

So beleaguered had the Secretary of State become that, in March, she broke off an interview with the BBC's "Women's Hour", leaving the studio when an interviewer apparently asked an unfriendly question.

Those examples of incompetence bring us to the serious charge of failure of policy. If the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Withington, will listen carefully, he will understand how that leads directly to the failure of his Department.

When the Government were elected, the Prime Minister appointed the Minister of State to his new job, with the all-embracing title of Minister for Welfare Reform. His task was to think the unthinkable. Clearly, the Prime Minister wanted to make people believe that he was serious about a radical reform of social security. We all thought, when he appointed the Minister of State, the man with such a track record, that that might have been his intent. I expect the Minister thought so too.

By late September, the Prime Minister had in his possession the Minister of State's considered views on reform—a Green Paper. It was just such a Green Paper that had been promised as a matter of urgency back in May, yet, far from seeing the light of day, that document was kicked around between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and later even the Secretary of State.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

The Government had expressed the intention that it would be published before Christmas. Nick Timmins wrote in the *Financial Times*:

"Frank Field, the Minister for Welfare Reform had a publication date of December 7th pencilled in for his green paper."

He had clearly been carefully briefed.

However, the Chancellor ensured that the Green Paper did not come out until after he had delivered the Budget, where he signalled a very different set of changes from those outlined by the Minister of State in past publications. The result was an emasculated Green Paper in March, which a number of influential commentators dismissed.

In the *Financial Times* of 27 March, Nick Timmins, whom most hon. Members respect as a commentator, stated:

"Almost four months on, the green paper actually manages to tell the public less about what is going on in welfare reform than it has already learnt from the leaking, spinning, and announcements that have taken place."

The Sunday Times of 29 March described that as "a missed opportunity" and Melanie Phillips, one of the people whom the Government like to brief, wrote in *The Observer*:

"Presenting Frank Field's Green Paper on welfare reform after the budget is back to front politics. . . the reason for the disorder is the lack of a coherent approach in Government."

That is the real issue—the lack of a serious and coherent approach, with everyone taking a chunk of welfare reform.

A classic example of lack of coherence in the reform process is reflected in the working families tax credit package. People will be paid benefits—credits—even if they are earning more than £30,000 a year. However, the Secretary of State seems to be obsessed by the idea of middle-class dependency, and she will affluence-test the same people to whom she plans to pay that credit—a case of absurdity and confusion.

The saddest part of the saga is the way in which the Prime Minister has walked away from his Minister of State and let the Chancellor continue to concentrate power in the Treasury.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): The Government whose social security policy is under scrutiny have published a strategy paper on welfare reform. Today, they published a paper on benefit fraud. Last week, they published a major document on child support. Will the shadow Secretary of State at some stage in his speech treat us to his views on substance, and will he get out of the gutter?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I have just dealt with substance. Labour Members do not like the fact that there is very little of substance in anything that the Government have yet produced. On the second point, they should not leave so much of what they think in the gutter.

Mr. Wicks: Let us deal with two matters of substance. We all agree, I hope, on the reform of child support. The Government propose a simpler formula and a maintenance disregard to give mothers some of the child maintenance. Does the shadow Secretary of State support those two major measures for reform?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that, when the Secretary of State came to the House with her proposals for Child Support Agency reforms, I said that, as far as we could make them work, we would support any constructive reforms. I shall deal with that later, if the hon. Gentleman will wait. It is no good his talking about the gutter. Are *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Financial Times* all in the gutter? Are all those commentators, who spend their lives considering social security matters, suddenly in the gutter because they disagree with the Government? That does the hon. Gentleman no credit.

Mr. Hope *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already. I shall make progress.

Beyond the Green Paper, perhaps the single most important issue facing the Government is the reform of pensions. What Melanie Phillips described as incoherence is well illustrated by the pensions policy review process. The Government are boxed in by their pre-election attacks on the basic pension plus proposals, which were described by *The Times* as the

"most dishonest act of the campaign"—

that is, the 1997 general election campaign. The Government's commitment to the state earnings-related pension scheme conflicts with the Minister of State's views, and has added to the confusion over pension reform.

The Chancellor contributed to the confusion by taxing pension funds early on and devaluing the SERPS rebate by getting rid of advance corporation tax dividend tax credit, raiding £5 billion a year from those funds. That complicated a review of pensions that was already likely to be complicated, and that is, after three consultations and endless leaks, finally to be kicked into the long grass by the Chancellor, perhaps some time in the autumn, even though the Minister, as he knows full well, said that it would be published in the first half of this year.

What is absolutely clear is that this area has been taken over by the Treasury; we know that from the leaks at the weekend about top-up payments. Such announcements always beg more questions than they answer, and it seems ironic that the pensions review is delayed and delayed while the Chancellor leaks his proposals without regard to the process of pension reform. Yet again, the Chancellor is pre-empting another Department of Social Security Green Paper. The two Departments should work together, not against each other.

Mr. Hope: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that there have been more than 2,000 submissions to the pension review from a substantial range of private sector organisations, voluntary organisations and many others? Will he confirm that the number of submissions from Conservative Members is nil?

Mr. Duncan Smith: What is most interesting about the hon. Gentleman's comment is that he has obviously not studied how many submissions came in. There were

2,000 to the first consultation but, by the time of the third, the number had dropped as low as about 10—people were sick and tired of constantly being asked to make policy for the Government. The Government were supposed to make proposals, but they have come forward with none. The hon. Gentleman should read those submissions, because they make fascinating reading—although his intervention was obviously quite facile.

No policy had been more hyped than the Secretary of State's pet project, the new deal for lone parents.

The Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women (Ms Harriet Harman): Hear, hear.

Mr. Duncan Smith: From the start, the figures showed that the vast majority of lone parents did not want to take part, with 75 per cent. not answering the first letter of invitation to interview and a return to work figure that oscillates, at best, between 5 and 7 per cent.

The right hon. Lady said, "Hear, hear," when I mentioned her pet project, but if she had spent a tenth of the time considering pensions and supporting the Minister for Welfare Reform, we might not have this problem. She has avoided the most serious area altogether, because she feels uncomfortable with it. If she had not been a single-issue merchant, and had got on with running the Department, we would not have the problem on pensions and we may not have had the problem on lone parents.

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I want to make progress.

Before any understanding of the figures could be gained, the Secretary of State leaped up and claimed success in September last year, a full two and a half months after the project got under way—wow! She claimed a figure of 20 per cent.; 5 per cent., the media said. The media were right. Furthermore, a large number of the 5 per cent. who returned to work would have done so any way, and the Secretary of State never gave us a breakdown for that figure.

That did not stop the Secretary of State continuing to issue press release after press release claiming success and credit when none was apparent. She has told us how much she is spending on the lone parent initiative, but, remember, she said, "Spend to save." She said that the initiative would save money by getting people into work. I have two questions for her, and perhaps she will answer right now: how much, exactly, will it save, and how many jobs will it create? I shall give way if she wants to give me the answers. No, she does not.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The hon. Gentleman has criticised the poor response rate to the new deal for lone parents. Is he aware that, when the Conservatives set up their parent plus pilot—of which, I believe, he was a supporter—they budgeted for a lower response rate than has been achieved on the new deal?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, because, as he will recall, that programme had one simple difference: the Secretary of State adopted the pilot areas, but she failed to take on the qualification programme involved with it. In every area, groups were divided into two and would have been checked from start to finish. Instead of having to rely on general figures from the Secretary of State, the hon. Gentleman would have known by now exactly what created the environment for people to go to work, which policy was the most successful and which were not working.

The Secretary of State has none of that in place, because, from the start, this was a political initiative aimed at saying, "Look, we did something." The Government, however, junked the most important part of the programme, which we had already set up. The hon. Gentleman, if he had checked, would have realised that we included the qualification programmes to check how the programme would work.

Let us deal with the cost, which is perhaps the most important issue. The most damning charge against the Government is the rising cost, given that Labour said that it would

"increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure."

The record is quite different. The working families tax credit will cost £420 million in 1999–2000, and £1.35 billion in 2000–01. Now we discover that the Chancellor is busy trying to hide £5 billion a year from the welfare bill by changing the way in which he accounts for the annual cost of the WFTC. By a process of smoke and mirrors, he intends to try to slide that money under the heading of accounting adjustments.

Everyone knows that that is an outrageous attempt to pretend that he has reduced the cost of welfare by £5 billion a year. The Office for National Statistics dismisses his claim that WFTC is part of the income tax system, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that it was "massively unhelpful" of the Chancellor to try to do that. He stands exposed not only of increasing the cost, but of trying to hide the core cost of £5 billion a year and pretending that he has saved money. That is a classic example of the Government saying and doing anything to pretend to the public that they are achieving their results.

The cost of the lone parent benefit, disability living allowance linking rule is an extra £10 million a year; changes to national insurance will cost £1.2 billion in 1999–2000 and £1.35 billion in 2000–01; the new child support package will cost £170 million in 1998–99, which will rise to £1.1 billion in 1999–2000 and more than that for 2000–01; and winter fuel payments cost £200 million in 1997–98, and will cost £200 million in 1998–99. The Government have never explained where they are getting the money for all that.

Mr. Heppell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I am not giving way.

Rather like the Chancellor's 2.25 per cent. projected increase in public spending, the new spending commitment to more than £7 billion appears to be an underestimate, as ever. This is only the beginning of the Government pumping up the whole of the social security budget.

Mr. Hanson *rose—*

Mr. Heppell *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am not giving way; I intend to conclude shortly.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

Equally serious is that, in spite of the talk about hand up and not hand-out, and getting people off welfare and into work, more people have been brought into the dependency net by extending the tapers and the raising of disregards in the new working families tax credit. Figures show that as many as 400,000 new families will be brought into dependency as a result of the measures announced in the previous Budget. That is an increase in dependency from the party that said that it would not increase dependency, but would cut it. That serious charge is levelled at the Government, and Ministers do not like it, because every single initiative has been a failure.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Keith Bradley): The hon. Gentleman has been given a note—he has been going on for too long.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) about the time, so the Minister should sit back on his Bench.

Add to all that the fact that a number of reviews are still to report, and the process of reform almost becomes biblical. Today was another example: Green Paper begets Green Paper begets Green Paper. There is not a policy in sight, with endless review after endless review.

Mr. Heppell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: No. The hon. Gentleman has nothing else to add.

The real problem that lies behind all that incompetence and policy failure is that, when the Government look back on their first year in office, they will realise that there has been a tragic waste of the best year that any Government since the war have had to reform welfare. On 28 March, *The Economist* said:

"The danger is that the story they record this year is the birth not of a better welfare system but just of a more expensive one."

That indictment of the very party that said that it would cut the bills hangs around the Secretary of State's neck.

Mr. Heppell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has said quite clearly that he is not giving way. Hon. Members must remain seated.

Mr. Duncan Smith: That indictment is becoming clearer as we head towards a public expenditure statement which has already loosened constraints on public spending without there being any constructive reform policies that might, in the long run, lead to better focus and the reduction of the burden of dependency and, with it, the unnecessary cost to the taxpayer. The Minister for Welfare Reform knows that, because that is why he was brought into the Government. It would have been better if he had been given his head properly to propose measures that could have been implemented.

On 1 January, the Opposition rightly offered the Government the chance of a serious debate on welfare reform. None has been forthcoming. Since then, we have been through a series of disappointments, delayed reviews and reviews that seem to point nowhere in particular, with long timetables running out to 2020, as if the next election will not matter. I supported the statement on the Child Support Agency, because it was their only constructive proposal. We have shown that we are prepared to have a serious debate, but the Government are running scared and have not taken up our offer.

During the past year, the Government have had a golden opportunity, but they have wasted it, because they have failed to deal with welfare reform constructively and positively. We charge them with total failure and incompetence, and I am afraid that that charge sticks.

7.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women (Ms Harriet Harman): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"congratulates the Government for their outstanding record in pursuing their efforts to provide opportunities for those who can work and security for those who cannot, to cut expenditure on economic and social failure and to modernise the welfare system."

One would not think from listening to the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) that tonight provides an opportunity to debate one of the crucial issues facing the House and the country: welfare reform. The hon. Gentleman failed to address any of the really important questions.

Despite the fact that, according to my hon. Friends, the hon. Gentleman spoke for 26 minutes—it seemed longer—he failed to set out his approach to tackling poverty, worklessness and social exclusion. We heard nothing about his proposals to support children and families. He had nothing to say about proposals to ensure security in retirement for pensioners. He made no suggestions about rooting fraud out of the system or how to tackle the spiralling costs of social and economic failure. He cannot decide whether he thinks that our policies do not work or that we do not have any—he changes from one view to the other.

The hon. Gentleman's so-called allegations—such as the allegation of cronyism—are either untrue or irrelevant. For the record, the company that had the advertising contract to make pensioners aware of the winter fuel payments was on a standing contract initiated by the Conservative Government, so if they are anyone's cronies, they are his. When I took up office as Secretary of State for Social Security, I and my team of Ministers took over a system that was in crying need of reform. Poverty and social exclusion were growing, and yet the costs of social security were rising.

Mr. Duncan Smith: They still are.

Ms Harman: They are not.

The system that we inherited from the Tories left one in five households of working age with no one in work. It left one in four children being brought up on benefits, never seeing the world of work. It left one in four pensioners existing on income support, or, worse, living below the income support level. The Tories wrote off millions of people who wanted to work—wrote them off to a life of dependence on benefits.

Despite profound social and economic change, the social security system still reflected the assumptions of Beveridge's day rather than the patterns of life today and of the next century. The social security system that we inherited was based on the assumption that men were the breadwinners and were in permanent full-time employment—interrupted only by temporary periods of unemployment—and that disabled people would be supported on benefits.

The Tories had not changed the system from Beveridge's assumption that women would be married and would stay married, that the woman's husband would support her while he was working, that his national insurance contributions would provide for her as well as for him if he was temporarily out of work, that she would depend on his income in retirement, and that his insurance would provide for her after his death. The social security system provided security for the man, and the man provided security for the woman.

Beveridge said that when women get married women, they

"give up gainful occupation. Housewives and mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the continuance of the British race."

Even though half those in employment are women, the system that I and my team of Ministers inherited did not expect women to work. Even if the man was unemployed and the woman had no children, she was classed as dependent on him rather than being available for work.

The Tories did not reform the system from Beveridge's expectation that women would be housewives and mothers, and would not bring up children on their own. Even though one in three marriages now break down and every year 100,000 children are born to couples who do not live together, the system that I and my team of Ministers inherited had not woken up to that, and had simply allowed more than a million lone mothers and their children to drift on to income support. Lone mothers have to bring up their children the hard way—on their own, on income support and with no money coming in from the father. That has resulted in mounting costs to the public purse and spiralling costs of social exclusion.

The Tories did not reform the system from Beveridge's expectation that people with long-term health problems or disabilities would depend on benefits but would not work. In Beveridge's day, most jobs involved heavy manual work. People with physical and mental disability or learning disabilities were beset by prejudice, so disability was synonymous with benefit dependence. Now there are 2 million long-term sick or disabled people who work, and 1 million more people who could work and who want to work. The system that we inherited was simply about classifying them and paying them benefit. It gave them no concerted help to get into work.

Beveridge assumed that people's work would provide the foundation of their income in retirement, and that it would only be a short retirement. Yet the system that we inherited left 1.5 million pensioners claiming income support and a further 1 million living below the breadline—not even getting the income support to which they are entitled.

Despite a revolution in the delivery of services—one can arrange most of one's life over the phone, from shopping to mortgages, 24 hours a day—the social security system that we inherited expected people to turn up at the office, queue, fill in pages and pages of forms and ask for the same information three times. No one ever explained or apologised. Few would say that claiming from the social security system was a pleasant experience, and few working in social security would disagree.

After 18 years in government, surely the Tories should have been aware of the profound social and economic changes, and should have understood and acted on them. Instead, the social security system was stuck in the past. The Tories failed to modernise it, and everyone was losing: the people who were written off to benefit dependence and the taxpayer who had to foot the bill.

We promised to modernise the social security system and to make it fair. We set out in our Green Paper the principles underpinning our welfare reform: work for those who can and security for those who cannot. We promised to tackle poverty and inequality, to cut the cost of social and economic failure and to tackle the scourge of fraud. That is what we promised, and that is exactly what we are doing. On the principle of work for those who can, our programme to help the young unemployed into work or training is well under way. Our programme for the long-term unemployed has begun.

But we have done more. The previous Government assumed that there were two groups of people, so only two Government policies were needed. The two groups were, first, people who were required to work and who would be helped to do so—which was considered to be Department of Education and Employment business—and, secondly, people who were not required to work and who were to be paid benefits—which was considered to be Department of Social Security business. They had no programmes for those who were not required to work, but who wanted to work and get off benefits and who could work.

To tackle the problem of workless households, I have looked beyond the employment register and asked who wants to work even though they are not compelled to work, and how we can help them to be better off and lessen their benefit dependence. I have established two completely new programmes, financed by the Chancellor out of the windfall levy: the new deal for lone parents and the new deal for the disabled.

The new deal for lone parents offers lone parents whose children are of school age help and advice into work. The step from the security of income support into work is difficult if they have to do it on their own, even with benefits to back them up in work. They cannot take risks if their children are depending on them. The new deal for lone parents gives them a personal adviser: a friend on the inside track who can advise them about jobs, training, interviews, benefits and child care—all the things a lone parent has to consider when she moves into work. The new deal is making a real difference.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way, but she knows perfectly well that her "new deal" for lone parents has been a complete shambles. She knows that 75 per cent. of lone parents contacted by the Benefits Agency did not even bother to respond, and that, on all the estimates, much fewer than 5 per cent. of lone parents who are currently on benefit have returned to work. Indeed, some estimates put the figure as low as 1 per cent. Will the

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

right hon. Lady give the House her own estimate of the number of lone parents who will find jobs as a result of the programme? What is her target?

Ms Harman: I do not need to give the House my estimate of the number of lone parents who will find jobs as a result of the new deal for lone parents. We have spent up to £1 million on an independent evaluation—by Social and Community Planning Research—of the additional number of lone parents who are in work and off benefit as a result of the new deal. The interim findings show that there are more lone parents in work than there would have been without the new deal, and that, if the new deal had been operating across the country—beyond the eight pilot areas—a further 10,000 lone parents would have been in work, and not on income support, as a direct result of it.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) presented me with a number of figures, which were mentioned on the radio by his hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. Let me tell the House what Social and Community Planning Research said about those figures. It said that the hon. Gentleman's figures were

"meaningless . . . leading to an incorrect conclusion".

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Ms Harman: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene again, I will give way to him.

Mr. Davies: At least the figures given by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) were figures. The right hon. Lady seems to be incapable of setting any targets, or coming up with any figures. Her response to me just now involved a double evasion. First, she shuffled off responsibility for evaluating the worthwhileness of her programme on to some so-called independent agency; secondly, she—who is responsible for the expenditure of public money in this regard, clearly has no business plan, and clearly has not worked out in her own mind what kind of public expenditure—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Davies: She has not worked out what kind of public expenditure is worth budgeting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must take his seat when I am on my feet. His intervention has been too long.

Ms Harman: The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has just astonished the House with his commitment to lone parents—a commitment that he did not find it possible to voice during all the years when his party was in government, and which he has mentioned for the first time during its time in opposition.

In fact, I did give a figure. If the new deal for lone parents had been working nationally beyond the eight pilot areas, an additional 10,000 lone parents would have been in work and not on income support. The new deal is making a real difference.

I am immensely proud of the work of our personal advisers. Although not highly paid, the staff are highly motivated, and have worked with determination, sensitivity and initiative. I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me an opportunity to place on record the great debt that we owe to the pioneer personal advisers. Most are women, many are mothers and some are lone mothers themselves. They have changed the face of social security, and their work means that today more lone parents are now in work and off benefit than would be the case otherwise.

Let me also place on record our thanks to lone parents organisations such as Gingerbread and the National Council for One Parent Families. Unlike the Opposition spokesman, those organisations care about lone parents; unlike him, they know what they are talking about. They helped to design our new deal for lone parents, and to design the training for our personal advisers. Above all, however, we need to recognise the lone parents to whom being a good mother means providing for children as well as caring for them. Such parents want to work not only to give their children a better standard of living than they could provide on benefits, but to show them that life is about work, not just about dependence on benefits. They want to work because—like other mothers—they know that they can contribute to society by working, as well as by rearing children.

Lone mothers who have found work through the new deal are, on average, £39 a week better off than they were on benefits, and their benefit dependence is reduced by £42 a week. They are better off, and the taxpayer is better off. That is the approach of welfare to work: a hand up, not just a handout. The new deal for lone parents will become national in October.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Laying aside all party-political broadcasts for a second, will the right hon. Lady tell us whether she would genuinely regard it as a success if her programme led to 1 per cent. of lone parents returning to work?

Ms Harman: I will not set targets. I have said that we will set targets once we have received the final result of the evaluation. No Government acting sensibly set targets before they have completed the pilots and the evaluation.

Mr. Duncan Smith: With respect, the right hon. Lady just said that she would not set targets, but she has given a figure of 10,000, and she is talking about a 1 per cent. figure. She is going national, without any idea of where the success lies. If she is going national—if the process is no longer experimental—she must surely tell us what the target is. Is it 1 per cent.?

Ms Harman: The 10,000 figure was not a target; it was what Social and Community Planning Research findings showed would be the number of additional lone parents in work had the new deal been extended nationally. The body also says that the size of the difference has increased gradually over time, and can be expected to continue to increase. I have said that we will set our target when we have the full results of the evaluation.

This is welfare reform in action. The working families tax credit will help to make work pay even more for lone mothers; the national child-care strategy and the

child-care tax credit will make it even easier for lone mothers to work by ensuring high-quality, affordable, accessible child care for all; and family-friendly employment policies, including extended maternity leave and reformed maternity pay, will help women and men to combine their work and family responsibilities. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made a good deal of my comments about statutory maternity pay, but his Government never reformed the statutory maternity pay system—a system that leaves the lowest-earning one fifth of women without the cover provided by statutory maternity pay.

I have made it clear that fathers, as well as lone mothers, have a responsibility to their children. The reform of the Child Support Agency—a policy ably developed by my noble Friend Lady Hollis, which I announced to the House last week—aims to ensure that fathers pay for their children. Our child maintenance premium will ensure that, for the first time, 700,000 children will be £10 a week better off through their fathers' maintenance. That, together with our unprecedented increase in child benefit, will make children better off, and will strengthen fathers' parental responsibility.

Let me say to the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends that, whatever the hon. Gentleman says—for all his puff and bluster, and his jousting with figures—he knows that this is modernisation for good, and that no Government will ever go back on the system that I have created.

We are also modernising the welfare system for people with disabilities. Most disabled young people in my constituency, and their mothers, tell me that they want the same as everyone else. They want to work like everyone else, to take pride in their work, to make friends at work and to earn their living at work. They want to contribute to society, not just to take. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I, with finance from the windfall levy, have extended the new deal to the long-term sick and disabled. That is welfare reform in action.

That has four strands: active advice and support for those seeking work; taking the disincentives to work out of the benefit system and extending to the disabled the incentives formerly available only to the registered unemployed; making work pay for those whose earnings are depressed by disability; tackling discrimination with tough new standards for employers, and giving employers incentives to extend opportunities to people with health problems or a disability.

In October, we begin the first of 12 pilot projects to offer, through jobcentres, personal advisers along the same lines as the new deal for lone parents. Those pilots will cover 250,000 people on incapacity benefit, who are among the many hundreds of thousands of people who were written off by the previous Government to a life of dependence on benefit. However, we know that it is in the voluntary sector that there is great expertise in helping people with disabilities and health problems, so we are awarding grants to partnerships of voluntary organisations and employers to pilot ways in which to help disabled people to get and stay in work.

This Thursday, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I will announce the 10 successful bids for the first tranche of partnerships. Our approach is to provide the opportunities and support for people who want to work to do so; the social security system that I inherited denied sick and disabled people those opportunities. Worse, to get the unemployment figures down, the Tories encouraged people off unemployment benefit and on to incapacity benefit. Classifying them as incapable of work solved the problem of the Tories' rising unemployment figures, but it increased the number of workless households, and wrote them off to a marginalised life on benefit.

About 1 million people on incapacity benefit are capable of at least some work. Under the Tories, if they took a risk and got a job, they were punished if it did not work out: they could go back on benefit, but be up to £40 a week worse off than when they were previously on benefit. Therefore, I have changed that, so that, if their job does not work out within the first 12 months, people can go back to the same rate of IB that they left. That encourages people to move off benefit into work, rather than penalising them.

We are piloting the extension to those on incapacity benefit of the jobmatch payment and the jobfinders grant, which are currently available only to those on jobseeker's allowance. Those on incapacity benefit face the same expenses as those on JSA in moving into work after a long time on benefit, so they should get the same help—the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and his hon. Friends never supported that. We are also helping people with health problems or disabilities to be much better off in work than on benefit, with our new disabled persons tax credit.

For a disabled person with a child under 11, moving from incapacity benefit to the disabled persons tax credit in work could mean that they are better off by £36 a week, and that their benefit dependence will be reduced by £71 a week. It is a hand-up, not just a handout. They are better off, and the taxpayer is better off. We are tackling social exclusion and investing in opportunity. That is our welfare reform in action.

All that, and the tough stance against discrimination that has been taken by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, amount to a radical programme of welfare reform that recognises for the first time the aspirations of people with disabilities, and acknowledges for the first time that their rights include the right to work.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): With my right hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform, I have met young adults in Croydon with very serious learning difficulties—some have Down's syndrome—who are now in work, but some of those in residential care seem to suffer from a particular poverty trap, because, to get their residential care cost, they have to stay on income support. It is a technical matter. I am not expecting an answer now, but will the Department of Social Security look closely at that matter, so that those young adults with serious learning difficulties can work full-time, not just part-time?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend has raised an important point, and we will certainly look into it. The system is full of disincentives to work for people who are on incapacity benefit, or are disabled because there was never an expectation that they would want to work or could work. I thank him for raising the matter.

I have talked about welfare reform being about work for those who can, and I turn to security for those who cannot. That brings me to pensions. It is a great concern

[Ms Harman]

that many of those heading to retirement face a drop in income that is far greater than it need be. It is a great scandal that many of the poorest people in Britain are pensioners—people who have worked hard all their lives, and now struggle to make ends meet.

For tomorrow's pensioners, we will reform the pension system, so that it tackles the growing inequality of income in retirement; extends occupational pensions to the many—up to 1 million—who currently do not join them; provides access to second pensions through our new stakeholder pensions for those who have no access to an occupational pension and for whom private pensions can be very poor value for money; provides second pension entitlements for those who care for an elderly or disabled relative or for children while they are young; and ensures that the growing number of the self-employed are properly provided for.

We will set out our pensions reform in a Green Paper, arising out of the work of the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), by the end of the year, but today's pensioners, particularly the poorest, cannot wait.

Hon. Members will remember that, while we were in opposition, pensions was an issue of some controversy within the Labour party. I was clear then, and I remain so, that we must recognise and take action to help all pensioners. We have done so with the cut in VAT and the winter fuel payment of £20 for every pensioner household, but I was also clear, and I remain so, that our priority must be to get help to the poorest pensioners—those on income support and those who are entitled to income support but not receiving it.

For pensioners on income support, we gave a winter fuel payment of £50.

Mr. Webb: The right hon. Lady rightly stresses the urgency of helping the poorest pensioners who are not claiming their income support. Does she accept that, on 1 May, when the Government came to power, half those 1 million pensioners were already claiming a means-tested benefit—housing benefit—and that local authorities throughout the land have lists of those 500,000 people, ready to hand over to central Government? Why is it going to take until the end of this year to get a Green Paper on something that could have been done 18 months ago?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point: it is possible to find out who is not claiming and get help to them. If I may, I will tell him how we are progressing on that element of the pension review in due course.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Harman: I am not going to give way.

We estimate that about 1 million pensioners are entitled to income support, but do not receive it. The previous Government were never interested in that. They did not even know the figures until I asked a parliamentary question. At first, the figure was that 800,000 pensioners were not receiving the income support to which they were entitled, and that rose to 1 million. That was a major failing of the previous Government—to leave 1 million pensioners not on the breadline, but below it. Again, I have taken action.

In April this year, I established, in nine areas, pilot projects to find ways in which to identify the poorest pensioners who are losing on their income support. In those pilot areas, we are searching our computer data and that of local authorities to identify those over pension age who look as if they might be eligible for income support but who are not registered as claiming it.

A personal adviser will then contact those pensioners, visit them and sort out their income support. The interim results of the research on those pilots shows that pensioners want help to find their way through the system—they cannot do it on their own, they do not want to wait in social security offices to get help, and they have simply no idea where to start. Our interim evaluation shows that some pensioners are losing 24p a week on unclaimed income support, and that others are losing up to £51 a week.

That is an indictment of the system that I inherited, and we are changing it. I visited one of the projects, in Paisley, Scotland, and met some of the pensioners and their personal advisers. The pensioners were delighted and relieved to be getting the extra help they need. The personal advisers were doing an excellent job—they, too, are changing the face of social security.

Our action is about ensuring that there is work for those who can and security for those who cannot, and getting benefits to those who are entitled to them. We are also stopping benefits going to those who are not entitled to them. I shall conclude by telling the House how we are transforming delivery of service and tackling fraud.

Social security reform has to deal not only with who gets money and how much they get, but with how the service is provided. That work is being ably led by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley). We are pioneering one-stop shops, so that those who are claiming do not have to go from the jobcentre, to the social security office and then to the council.

We are sorting out the forms, so that we do not ask those who are claiming three times for the same information, most of which we already have. We are also piloting telephone claims services for pensioners, introducing a new complaints system, and tackling fraud—work which was being ably developed by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Itchen but is now being carried forward by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform.

In November 1997, I launched the benefit fraud inspectorate—which has already published its first report, on housing benefit fraud in Blackpool. Today, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform published a Green Paper on fraud, which he is working on tackling.

In this debate, I have explained to the House—at some length, for which I apologise—actions that amount to a major programme of welfare reform that is already up and running. After 18 years of the system going in the wrong direction, we never expected to turn it round overnight. However, substantial welfare reform is under way in

every part of the social security system. It is practical action—making a real difference to people's life—which is what matters to my constituents, and to those of other hon. Members on both sides of the House. That is a record on which I and my ministerial team are proud to be judged.

8.11 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I do not think that any hon. Member would dispute the fact that, since the general election last May, there has been a great deal of confusion and even dissent at the Department of Social Security. We have seen open rebellion by Labour Members on the issue of lone parent benefit cuts, and a complete lack of long-promised policies to tackle the causes—as opposed to merely the symptoms—of pensioner poverty. We have seen, as recently as last week, the failure to produce a fair and workable solution to the problems of child support caused by the complex nature of human relationships. We have seen also what should have been key projects implemented in a disastrous manner.

It was therefore interesting to hear the Secretary of State concentrate in her speech almost entirely on the policies that she still intends to introduce in the future, rather than on the level of incompetence with which she and her colleagues have handled their portfolio in the past year. That latter point is the main subject of today's motion by the Conservatives.

Let us take, for example, the benefits integrity project. What a misnomer that was. The project's main outcome seems to have been to accuse unfairly many who have acted with complete integrity, only for those accusations to prove to be completely unfounded. The project that was supposed to evaluate entitlement to disability living allowance, and thereby to restore integrity, has managed simply to strip away the dignity of many of those who were investigated.

The Social Security Committee's report was uncompromisingly damning in its assessment of the project, and the project's outcome is now widely acknowledged as a failure. The Department of Social Security failed to uncover almost any fraudulent claims. Meanwhile, many of the most severely disabled people had their benefits reduced or even stopped. Some people—perhaps primarily Labour Members—seem to think that the Prime Minister is capable of walking on water. However, even he hit problems when the Government's solution to patients who are quadriplegics was to tell them to rise from their beds and work.

It is to be hoped that the newly established disability benefits forum will achieve its aim. It would be nice to think that it will go some way towards rebuilding trust between those who are disabled, their organisations and the DSS itself. However, I suspect that it will take a very long time to rebuild that trust. I should be grateful if the Secretary of State told us, in line with the report's recommendations, what action she has taken to review the rules of conduct and good practice for general elections, to minimise the risk of such errors of judgment occurring in future.

Then there are smart cards—which are not so smart, as it turns out. The £1.5 billion contract awarded, in 1996, to ICL to computerise benefit payments at post offices is currently running two years behind schedule. By March 1998, only 40,000 claimants were using the new system, compared with the 19 million people nationwide who should have been able to use it. Although it is claimed that the system will eradicate £150 million in fraud each year, the DSS has already incurred huge costs in consolidating all its benefits payments on to one central database, to make it compatible with the Post Office automation system. Although the costs may well be as much as £200 million—rather more than the Government are expecting to regain in combating fraud—the DSS is still waiting, as it will be waiting for at least another two years, for potential savings in reduced fraud to be made.

No one disputes the important and laudable objective of eliminating fraud. However, those examples illustrate how poor management at the Department has hampered efforts on that front and done little to enhance public confidence in or regard for the benefits system.

Then there was the Public Accounts Committee's report on the failure of the NIRS 2—national insurance recording system—project. The report highlights gross incompetence within the DSS. The Department awarded a contract on the basis of flimsy information and a rushed timetable. It failed to ensure that it was getting value for money, or to make contingency plans for potential delays in the project. It failed also to gain adequate compensation when the project did not start on time. The Contributions Agency itself assessed the proposals by Andersen Consulting as

"technically only on the margins of acceptability".

It is quite clear from the PAC report that the agency's actions went beyond the margins of acceptability.

There have been failures even in implementing policy. Winter fuel payments have already been mentioned in the debate and are a case in point. For a start, the Chancellor's use of the description "pensioner households" caused much confusion at the DSS. Calculating payments using that definition required data correlation in about 15 million computer records, involving 15 qualifying benefits across nine computer systems. It was therefore no surprise to learn that, last winter, administration costs alone were 10 per cent. of overall expenditure.

On top of huge delays in sending out cheques, implementation was such a huge disaster that £1.7 million was spent on what should have been a totally unnecessary advertising campaign, telling people that it was all right to cash the cheques that landed on their doorsteps. Anyone would have thought that one could assume that it is all right to cash a cheque that lands on one's doorstep. The fact is that 40,801 invalid girocheques were sent out with an incorrect date on them; 649 pensioners received two lots of £50 payments; and in 434 cases, both the invalid and the replacement cheques were cashed. I understand that letters have now been sent out "inviting repayment".

What about the so-called crisis in welfare spending? Although for many years there certainly has been growth in welfare spending, growth is now levelling out. As a percentage of gross domestic product, social security expenditure in Britain is forecast to fall. By the Government's own figures, planned social security expenditure in 1998–99 is lower by £588 million than it was projected to be in last year's expenditure plans. The biggest problem that we face with such expenditure is not the total amount, but the failure to target benefits properly on those who need them most.

As has been mentioned, an estimated 1 million pensioners still do not claim the income support to which they are entitled and, as a result, do not qualify for other

[Mr. David Rendel]

associated benefits. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) pointed out, the names of half those people have been known to local authorities for years, yet the Secretary of State is only just getting around to pilot projects to address the problem.

I should like to raise another aspect of all those failures—the fact that Conservative Members seem to have gained tremendous powers of hindsight since their defeat last year. Several of the schemes in which they correctly identified significant problems have at their root the way in which they were established under the previous Administration. In the case of the benefits integrity project, NIRS 2 or smart cards, it is no good their standing up and accusing the new Government of mismanagement, without acknowledging their own part in the problem. The Conservatives would do well to remember that some of the projects were set up years before the election.

In respect of the benefits integrity project, the Social Security Committee report described as "regrettable" the failure of the former Minister of State to consult disability organisations. Further, it stated that it was "totally unacceptable" to have formally launched the BIP before the general election and before incoming Ministers had had the opportunity properly to assess the project that was then set in motion. Perhaps the most important point to recognise is that many of the mistakes associated with the BIP occurred at the inception of the project. They date from the moment at which the previous Government failed to consult disability organisations, and ploughed on with the project without regard for the people it was targeting.

If we are talking about incompetence, Conservative Members might care to look a little more closely at the so-called incompetence index that they published last month. It was drawn up as an illustration of ministerial incompetence at the Department of Social Security. It refers to cold weather payments instead of winter fuel payments, which are a very different matter. If one is complaining about incompetence, it is important not to be incompetent. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

As the debate has developed, it has become increasingly clear that it is the second social security debate introduced by the Conservatives in two weeks that is rapidly turning into something of an own goal.

Mr. Wicks: I did not plan to intervene, as I hope to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but to be fair, past Ministers under the previous Administration dealing with the benefits integrity project made it clear that there should be consultation with organisations representing those with disabilities. That instruction was ignored by civil servants in the interregnum between the previous Administration and the present one. The Select Committee—its Chairman is here—did not attach blame to past or present Ministers.

Mr. Rendel: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I shall continue with the important point that I was making, which is still valid. The Conservatives have to take much of the blame for what has gone wrong. The motion, which attacks the Labour Government for their incompetence, must be one of the most hypocritical that any Opposition party has ever dared to bring to the House. As such, it does not deserve and will not get any support from the Liberal Democrats.

It is true that the Government did not start with the best hand. The Secretary of State was right when she said earlier that the Government had inherited a social security system that was in a mess. Indeed, in social security, as perhaps in no other sector, most of us felt that the Government had a right to say as they came to power, "Things can only get better," but that was before we had lone parent benefit cuts, council tax benefit cuts, the benefits integrity project and the incompetent handling of the NIRS 2 project.

Unbelievable as it may seem, in the very area where there was total cross-party agreement that reform was needed, the Government succeeded in doing what most people would have thought impossible—making things worse. It is no credit to the Conservatives, most of whose plans have now been implemented by the Government with dire results, but it is certainly no credit to the Government either. If, as expected, the Secretary of State is soon removed from her post, it cannot be said that many Opposition Members, or, I suspect, Labour Members, will be sorry to see her go.

8.24 pm

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): When I read the motion last week, I wondered what on earth was going on. I could not believe the words on the Order Paper. Then I realised that there must have been a mind block among the Conservatives—they had forgotten about last year's general election, thought that they were still in power and were referring to their last year in office.

When we talk of confusion, contradictory policies and incompetence, the jewel in the crown must be housing benefit. In 1982, when my local authority received guidance from the Department, it was told that it would probably require six staff to administer the new benefit. Within 12 months there were 154 permanent staff and 48 part-timers—somewhat more than six. As for being contradictory, for many years Housing Ministers were deregulating rents, forcing up council rents and lowering grants to housing associations—which also drove up rents in that sector—while social security departments were picking up the bill. Short-term thinking led to long-term debts; there was no co-ordination or co-operation.

Before the Social Security Act 1988, there used to be a wonderful document called the yellow book—a simple volume detailing social security. The 1988 Act introduced the blue book, which comprised 17 volumes detailing the law relating to social security. In addition, there was the adjudication officer's guide, which now consists of 24 volumes. That is the legacy of 18 years of Conservative government.

The most outrageous provision in the 1988 Act was the brainchild of the former Prime Minister. The social fund was a wonderful new system of lending money to the poor to pay for their most basic needs. It now has administration costs of 37 per cent. of money that it handles. By any stretch of the imagination, that is incompetent and contradictory.

Moving on to the 1990s, who can recall with glee the disability living allowance, which is both incompetent and contradictory? It is contradictory to the principles of care in the community and is an example of incompetence on a grand scale in its establishment, implementation,

organisation and administration. The classic example, which I shall not dwell on because it hurts, was the Child Support Agency. After three major pieces of legislation in seven years, only one in eight single parents get the full maintenance to which they are entitled.

It took until 1996 for the previous Government to recognise that legislation was required to deal with fraud. It took them 17 years to introduce legislation to tackle that major issue. In the same year, they introduced incapacity benefit and the dreaded, discredited, disjointed all work test—a terrible way to assess whether people were capable of work.

The biggest indictment of all of the previous Administration has to be their treatment of the staff who work in the Benefits Agency. When the Conservatives left office, there were some 62,000 staff in the Benefits Agency. More than 5,000 of them were temporary and 13,500 had fewer than five years' service. There was a constant drain on the staff, as people were totally disgusted with the way in which they were treated. Training budgets were slashed, and training became a business unit, which had to attract customers from different parts of the Benefits Agency. As that was in the middle of the three-year plan to reduce running costs by 25 per cent., no one bought in training, and the staff became further and further removed from the legislation that they were being expected to implement.

As a result, decision making went down the pan; it became hit and miss. The incidence of violence against staff was intolerable. Morale was at rock bottom. Decision making went out of the window—so many people appealed against wrong decisions that they now have to wait 10 months for a tribunal. For seven successive years, the National Audit Office failed to sign the Department of Social Security accounts because of confusion, contradictory policies and incompetence.

The Conservative party legacy was inertia in the Department, the dead hand of dependency on claimants and an inactive service that did nothing to help people, but merely served the bureaucracy. Between 1979 and 1997, the social security bill increased in real terms by £43 billion—the only commensurate increase was that in the numbers of people living in poverty. The service did nothing except to drive people further into desperation. For the Conservative party to table such a motion after its 18-year stewardship of the social security system is the height of hypocrisy.

8.31 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I welcome the opportunity to have another debate on this important subject. In tabling the motion the day before the House is told the outcome of the departmental spending review, the Conservative party show a brilliant sense of timing. Arguably, the most important thing that the Secretary of State does in any year is to have a battle with the Treasury over the departmental budget. We should see the results of that tomorrow, so to discuss social security tonight on an Opposition Supply day is premature, to say the least.

Many interesting things have happened in the past 12 months. The Government's welfare-to-work scheme is very important, especially in the long-term cultural shift that I hope it will achieve. It is not pejorative to say that the jury is still out on the scheme's success, but the policy is courageous—the Government have taken the debate a long way—and I wish it well.

The Government badly misjudged their policy on single parents, and they have wholly failed to correct their mistake. The Green Paper contains much that is of interest. The success measures, in particular, are an interesting tool for future policy development, although it remains to be seen whether we have got them right. Nevertheless, they represent an interesting departure, and I hope that the whole House will apply its collective mind and will to making the best of them.

I wish the Minister well in his deliberations on pensions reform. The delay in the deployment of policy is beginning to become a wee bit worrying. I am known as someone who is always in favour of hastening slowly and taking the appropriate amount of time to get things right, but there are worries that the delay is becoming a paralysis.

We must not forget the recommendations of the pension provision committee, which is admirably chaired by Tom Ross. There are two sides to pensions policy; the Minister is interested in developing stakeholder plans, but we must also remember the current pensioner population. Some of the committee's recommendations provide important lessons that we should all take on board. I see some Labour Members waving copies of the report, so I look forward to their contributions.

The introduction of tax credits also represents an interesting and potentially important departure, although the detail may thwart some of the Government's more laudable aims. In particular, there are some real misgivings about the details of the proposed disability tax credit for disabled people.

Much has happened, and much has yet to evolve from the Government's plans. I want to look forward and to concentrate in particular on the Government's plans to work with the Benefits Agency to promote the notion of modern service, which I believe to be an important part of the Government's programme. The administration of benefits must be simplified; administrative systems must be put in place that can deploy modern benefits efficiently. The system must be transparent to claimants and proof benefit eligibility gateways against the fraud about which we are all rightly concerned.

I am nervous that the comprehensive departmental spending review will say that the Department will have to pay for its administrative budget through savings from fraud. The Government are now saying that estimated losses to fraud have increased from £4 billion to £7 billion, but that figure is notional—I would dearly love to see the methodology tightened up, so that the data were more robust and policy makers could make more rational and sensible decisions.

To tell local authorities that, if they drive down fraud by 50 per cent., they can keep 10 per cent. of the money they save is to invite them to look for fraud. However, as the Select Committee's report on the disability living allowance showed, there is a fine line between inaccuracy and fraud. People may not intuitively perceive that they need to report changes in circumstance, so they may claim benefit to which they are not entitled, but whether that is fraud depends on whether they are deliberately deceiving the system. It is hard to know how central Government can produce a policy to deal with fraud, but we must be careful about saying that fraud costs £7 billion and that everyone is at it, which stigmatises people who need to claim benefit.

[Mr. Archy Kirkwood]

We must adopt a balanced approach. We should concentrate on the prevention rather than on the detection of fraud, and I welcome the fact that the Green Paper does that. However, fraud will not be detected until the administrative budget can pay for data matching, home visits and all the other mundane, run-of-the-mill matters that any ordinary private business would have to attend to if it were to have any chance of solving such problems.

I fear that tomorrow the Treasury will say that the programme of change and the 25 per cent. reduction in administrative budgets over three years—which is now beginning to bite into the bone, not the fat, of the Benefits Agency area offices—will have to continue.

It is absolutely essential that, in applying for benefits, people can act as they do when they buy an insurance policy. They phone up and speak to operators who have a screen in front of them. The form is filled in and sent out to be signed; when it returns with the accompanying documents, it is processed. That is the way in which modern commerce deals with the equivalent of a benefit application. With its current budget, the Benefits Agency is light years away from that level of service.

It is senseless for jobseeker's allowance to be spread across the Department for Education and Employment and the Benefits Agency. It is madness for the Department to act as a gateway and the agency as a processing arm. That is yet another example of how the previous Government could never make up their mind. I do not care which way it goes, but the Department or the agency should be assigned the whole process.

In a Benefits Agency office the other day, I saw an officer holding a sheet labelled "Workaround 115". A workaround is what the staff have to do to make the computer system get round a procedure that it was not designed to do in the first place. Cheat sheets show staff how to get round the inadequacy of the software. They spend more time on finding workarounds than on almost any other task.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) mentioned the plastic benefit card. The delays are worrying, in terms of both efficiency and combating fraud. It is a classic case of a project that should be given high priority.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Today, I received a reply to a specific parliamentary question about what action was taking place: the Minister said that there was none.

Mr. Kirkwood: I hope that the Government will consider the issue, which I do not think is in any way party political. I remember the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), waving a plastic benefit card in a splendid photo-opportunity, but he would not look quite so splendid if he did it again now, and neither would any current Minister. I hope that something will be done soon.

The access to corporate data schemes—the so-called Accord system—are also in danger of going wrong. I want to try to encourage Ministers to look differently at the project. As I understand it, it is no more or less than a procurement exercise. If we cannot get the three private sector consortiums to come up with a complete redesign that goes right through from the local office to the over-arching system, buying a new set of computers and a software application to be used locally will not realise the potential of the experiments.

I am in favour of benchmarking, and a lot can be learned from the private sector, but we must be careful about the proprieties of the contribution of Benefits Agency staff. I hope that I am wrong and that the Accord process is not simply a way of enhancing service delivery at area level. I hope that it will be an intrinsic part of the future development and simplification of the whole benefits programme.

The Green Paper on fraud was published today. My local authority has been struggling in an attempt to work out how it can take part in the so-called benefits verification framework, which would allow it to bear down on council tax and housing benefit fraud. I am told that the estimated cost for the council to introduce the framework is about £110,000, while the Department's subsidy is only £16,000. The council estimates the recurring cost at £250,000 per annum, for which it will receive a maximum of £40,000 from the Department, if it does everything 100 per cent. the way that the Department wants.

I do not know how accurate those figures are, but they are frightening. The scheme is voluntary at the moment, and there is no way in which we can persuade local authorities to get involved if that is the difference between what they are offered and what they estimate that the cost will be. Everyone can see the need for the scheme, although it may be that the Department has gold-plated it. The practice is everything: it is all very well having fancy Green Papers and great plans—we all support them—if cash-strapped local authorities cannot implement them.

There is a lot of work to do, and with a wee bit of good faith we can make some improvements. The Government need to be realistic about how we need to spend to save. The Treasury acknowledges that. We need to put more capital expenditure into the benefits system so that we can simplify it for the long-term benefit of everyone, including the claimants.

8.46 pm

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood)—my hon. Friend—whose chairmanship of the Social Security Select Committee we all appreciate, given the challenging agenda that we have.

I always welcome a debate on social security, although my first instinct was to regret the fact that the official Opposition had not tabled a motion that looked to the future, wanting instead to dwell, in a very partisan way, on the immediate past; but, on reflection, it is useful to have an opportunity to scrutinise carefully the mismanagement of the Department of Social Security over the past 20 years, because in considering future challenges we need to understand what has gone wrong in the past.

There is a sense in which the time span is even longer, although there is no time to dwell on all the history. It is half a century since the foundation stones of a modern welfare state and a modern social security system were laid. The first key foundation stone was a relationship between work and welfare, which is a modern theme and challenge, and in those days the assumption—of Keynes, Beveridge and many others—was that we could afford a

decent social security system only if the foundation stone was full employment. Many politicians of all parties accepted that. The roll call includes not only Bevan, Attlee, Beveridge and Keynes, but Conservative leaders such as Harold Macmillan, who, leading Governments in the earlier post-war period, recognised that full employment was important.

The second foundation stone was an ethical one, involving national insurance. It was said that all citizens had a duty and a responsibility to pay contributions into a community chest, and had the right to draw out of that chest in times of need, both when they were old and when they became sick or unemployed.

At a time when we are trying to recreate a sense of honesty and fairness in our systems, it is useful to look back to that age. There was a safety net—national assistance, which is now called income support—based on a means test, but it was meant to be for the few, not the many, to coin a phrase. It has turned out very differently.

I welcome the Opposition's debate. The abandonment of the goal of full employment during the Thatcher era was crucial. Suddenly, the state did not agree with Macmillan and Attlee and other, wiser people. It was no longer the job of the state to maintain full employment. It was thought that the market would try to create full employment, but it was not the Government's job to do so.

The Thatcher Governments sought to set people free from the state, but, with growing poverty and inequality, the paradox was that many more people found themselves totally dependent on the state for their income during the Thatcher and Major years than ever did in the wicked days of social intervention. The number of those dependent on income support doubled during those years, from one in 12 of the population to one in six. The irony is that Thatcherism created the very dependency state from which it had promised to set people free. Perhaps some apology should be made from the Conservative Front Bench.

One of the most appalling statistics I have ever read came in an answer to a parliamentary question late in the previous Parliament. I asked how many babies in Britain were born to parents on income support, or on family credit because their wages were low. The answer was one in three. We all aspire to do well for our children, but the poorest in Britain are the new-born. What kind of society is that?

We need a debate on the mismanagement of social security over recent years. The social security budget is distorted if we spend less on insurance benefits and more on means testing. Some 35 per cent. of social security spending is devoted to means-tested benefits. In 1979–80, the figure was quite high at 16 per cent., but it doubled during the Conservative years, and with that came poverty traps and disincentives that all of us should deplore. Fraud also grew because of the growth of means testing.

Sadly, former Governments lowered their guard against fraud by cutting the number of home visits, which was a cardinal error. Criminals—those who make multiple claims, and landlords who defraud the system of thousands of pounds a week—saw a new market for their operation. It is controversial to say so, but the climate of division and greed that existed during the Thatcher and Major era, when there was, apparently, no such thing as society, led to a culture of dishonesty among some people. If it was okay to defraud the tax system, some thought, it was also okay to defraud the social security system.

The new Green Paper on benefit fraud is crucial to undoing much bad work. Its emphasis on deterrence, detection and prevention is important. In creating new benefits such as the working families tax credit, which the Select Committee is currently considering, we must try to design fraud out. That is easier said than done, but fraud must be one of the criteria in policy design.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the growth of means testing. Is it not simplistic to say that that means testing is always bad? The working families tax credit is family credit by any other name, although it will be accounted for differently. It is still income-dependent. As well as increasing that category of means testing, the Government will help pensioners to claim more income support, which will mean more spending on means testing. Both those policies are presumably welcome to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Wicks: The hon. Gentleman knows that I am anti-means tests by instinct. I am a universalist, and if that is old-fashioned, tough. The working families tax credit is an ingenious new method of targeting without the crudities of a means test. Income taxation is a means test, but the Chancellor is developing a new way, through what some of us know as fiscal welfare, to target the poor, not just benefit the rich, through tax reliefs and allowances.

On issues regarding old age, I welcome attempts to use data matching and local authority records, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) has suggested, to help people—often in their 70s, 80s or 90s—who should be claiming income support. Like the hon. Gentleman, I have an interest in alternative methods of helping the elderly, and I wonder whether there should be a pension premium—perhaps on a cohort basis so that it could be phased out—for people over 80, who tend to be the poorest among our elders.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman has a distinct and welcome penchant for honesty. Can he honestly persuade himself that the working families tax credit does not involve a means test?

Mr. Wicks: The Select Committee is considering how the credit will work, and I see it as at least the beginning of an attempt to use the tax system to target people on low incomes who have caring responsibilities, such as parents, without the crudities of a means test.

Mr. Letwin: It is not the tax system. At the negative end of the tax system, there is a withdrawal rate, exactly as there is for means testing.

Mr. Wicks: Questions remain about the withdrawal rate, but withdrawal is being done far more sensitively than with some of the crude means tests of the past. We are in a new phase in the history of social security. Can we use the tax system for fiscal welfare that targets the poorest? There is a way to target without having the crudities of the old-style means test. The Select Committee is examining working families tax credit as honestly as it can. I am glad to be called honest by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin); he will receive no solicitor's letter from me for saying that. However, we must keep an open mind.

[Mr. Wicks]

In further honest pursuit of the Conservative record on social policy and mismanagement of social security, let us consider pensions mis-selling, which is one of the great scandals of the post-war period. Apologies are often in fashion now; tonight might provide an opportunity for the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) to clear his party's conscience about pensions. We all know what happened. The previous Government suddenly discovered personal pensions and sought to persuade all sorts of people to buy them. That persuasion was readily taken up by pension companies that mis-sold personal pensions to people who were seriously concerned about security in their old age.

The arithmetic in this area is breathtaking. I consulted the Library for a briefing. The Financial Services Authority is trying to sort out the scandal. It reckons that 640,000 people will be covered under phase 1 of its work. That is likely to cost the pensions industry £4.5 billion, which equates to an average of about £7,000 per person. The FSA is now on to phase 2, under which 1.8 million people will be covered. It reckons that those 1.8 million people comprise 985,000 transfers—people who transferred their company pension entitlements into personal pensions, which is nearly always a mistake—682,000 non-joiners who were eligible to join a company scheme but who were advised to take out a personal pension instead; and 154,000 opt-outs who were persuaded to leave occupational pension schemes in order to start personal pension schemes.

It is now estimated that the pensions mis-selling scandal will cost the industry £11 billion. I have met many of the people—such as nurses, police officers and teachers—who are behind that disturbing arithmetic. They had decent occupation pension schemes but were persuaded by salesmen, acting as a kind of army for Tory Ministers, to move out of occupational pension schemes and into personal pension schemes. It seemed attractive at the time, but it turned out to be not fairer but fouler.

We all know that child maintenance is a difficult subject. However, from the start, many people—including myself—warned the then Tory Government that they were making mistakes regarding child support, not in terms of the principle of parental responsibility, which we all support, but in terms of the mechanisms. A particular mistake was that there was nothing for the seven out of 10 lone mothers on income support or for their children. The decision to knock £1 off income support for every £1 of child maintenance collected led some to dub it an Exchequer support agency rather than a child-centred policy. It is about time that children got a look in, and I am pleased that they will as a result of the new Green Paper. This is a case study in social security mismanagement. The Conservatives had stewardship of the system for many years, and child maintenance was an incompetent shambles. Some honesty—I use that word again—is in order here.

One of the great features of that period was the way in which it affected the expenditure of public moneys. We know that the Government have great priorities in terms of education, health and social care. We are devoting one third of total public spending to social security. At the beginning of the Tory reign, that figure was one fifth. There are major challenges ahead, and I know that the rhetoric is easier than the practice. However, I think that the Tory years are associated with galloping poverty. The challenge for the new Government—I see the policies being put in place—is to promote opportunity.

The Conservative years are associated historically with mass unemployment. The challenge for Labour is to promote training and work: what we call the new deal. The Tories introduced and defended, year after year, the catastrophic Child Support Agency. The challenge for my colleagues on the Front Bench is to introduce a fair and efficient child-centred child maintenance service. I think that the policies in the Green Paper are correct. I only add modestly that a change to the agency's name would herald a new era.

Mr. Loughton: The people's Child Support Agency.

Mr. Wicks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that sensible contribution.

The Tory years are associated with increasing fraud in our social security system. I take the point raised by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire that the difficult issue is how to say that fraud is wrong but that it is right and proper for people to collect benefits to which they have a claim. That is a difficult operation, but we must do it. It is all about bringing honesty and integrity into the system.

Over the past 18 years, until May last year, what we called social security was more an indicator of social insecurity in terms of the money spent and the distortions regarding means testing, disincentives and dishonesty. My colleagues on the Front Bench face a major challenge in creating a system that we could truly describe as social security.

9.3 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I cannot believe that the Secretary of State thinks that what has happened in the past year is even close to what the citizens of this country expected of the Labour Government in terms of social security reform. People expected vision from the Minister for Welfare Reform. They expected a radical approach that they thought would come more easily from a Government of the left than from a Government of the right. People expected a reduction in the cost of social welfare, which they expected to be more focused on those in need, and in the unnecessary cost of recirculating citizens' taxes back to them. They expected an updating of, and clear decision on, national insurance.

The hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) said that expenditure went up from a fifth to a third of all Government expenditure. That was essentially because of changes to the global economy. Continental Europe has had even worse rises in unemployment and welfare expenditure. A Government who feel that membership of the euro is likely to be helpful in achieving Keynesian full employment have got that one very wrong.

It is not only a matter of the painful level of unemployment of the early 1990s, and, indeed, the early 1980s, when economies were restructuring. We are at a relative cyclical low. As in America, unemployment is below 5 per cent., but we go on pumping in more than £100 billion per annum. The mounting expenditure is not predominantly the result of high unemployment.

I cite also the perspective of the majority of the country, the majority of middle-of-the-road, average, husband-and-wife families bringing up two children. They expected

reforms that did not leave them paying more and more for other people and subsidising the bringing up of other people's children. They expected a fairer deal for themselves. Many of them voted against the previous Government. They felt that they picked up the bill for many things that had gone wrong in our society over the past 15 years.

I was appalled by what the Secretary of State had to say. She almost seemed to be saying—I am not quite sure what she was saying—that the key reform was to help lone mothers and to modernise the welfare system to take account of the fact that women worked and that an increasing number of women brought up children by themselves. I do not believe that that is what the country expects of the Government.

There are two aspects to the subject of single parent families. First, there is the breakdown of marriage. The community fully supports and sympathises with wives and mothers abandoned by their husbands. The other aspect is the voluntary choice to have children alone. I do not believe that women who make that choice have the support of society. As far as possible, society would wish children to continue to be brought up by a two-partner unit, whether formally married or not.

The reality is that £7 billion of expenditure has been added, and another 400,000 people have been brought into dependency. The redistribution agenda of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and not the Minister for Welfare Reform, has guided what has happened so far. The radical thinking of the Minister for Welfare Reform has been somewhat stillborn. I would be sad if that thinking had no chance to bear fruit before the next general election.

I want to focus on some aspects of the working families tax credit, which unfortunately encourages some of the problems mentioned by the hon. Member for Croydon, North. It is axiomatic that a society that can afford it can make otherwise unviable family units viable by the transfer of resources. Society can do that in two ways: either by providing mothers with an income to stay at home and bring up their children, or by paying for child care and so allowing mothers to work. Those are forms of subsidy which are of equal inherent value and there is no moral argument for choosing one over the other, but the Labour reforms clearly favour the latter course—to pay for child care and allow mothers to work.

It is both unwise and unfair not to take the view that a mother who stays at home to bring up her children is doing just as worthwhile and valuable a job in society. I believe that mothers will respond by working, even if the work they do is not implicitly of greater value to society than the work of looking after their children, which they will hire other people to do.

What is wrong are the system's disincentives to sustain the relationship between the parents of children. The measures have increased the income to those without a partner, and the rate of withdrawal of subsidy has been lowered. The net effect is that, if a woman's husband or partner is earning the average wage of £330 per week, unless he spends less than about £100 a week on his own personal expenditure, he is of no value to that family—the father on the average wage is of no value to the mother and their children. That comes about because the 55 per cent. withdrawal from husbands' after-tax income is subtracted from family credit. If the husband leaves, the wife receives the couple's married allowance. There is massive incentive to cheat, because, if two people are not living together as husband and wife for tax and welfare purposes, they are better off by £107 per week—38 per cent. better off.

The bottom line about what is wrong is that the working families tax credit is based on family income, whereas income tax is based on individual income, but the two systems have been intermixed. If a couple can present themselves as one absent parent and one lone parent with an income of £250 per week, the state will make them better off than a couple who are together with an income of £450 per week. Can that be right? I thought that new Labour and the Prime Minister were committed to the family unit and to sustaining it, but the biggest welfare reform of the past year appears to introduce both a major disincentive for having a two-parent family unit and a major incentive to commit fraud.

Yes, mothers will be better off and they will be encouraged to work, but the marginal value of a husband has been substantially reduced. That is the price of three features of the system: first, that the benefits are paid to families, rather than to individuals; secondly, that families receive a higher basic income; and, thirdly, that the rates of withdrawal will be lowered. Once those aspects are factored in, the net effect is as I have described. There is cross-party agreement on the need to get rid of poverty traps, yet, post-family credit, the number of households now facing marginal tax rates of 50 per cent. rises from 800,000 to 1.3 million; and, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the figure has the potential to rise to 2 million. The Government have enormously increased such disincentives.

I believe that people expected the Government to act urgently on their stakeholder pension proposals. There are about 7 million or 8 million people without pension arrangements, but the Government have boxed themselves in. They would have been wiser to support the previous Government's proposals. What has happened? The Green Paper has been deferred again and again.

I suggest that the problem is that the Labour party is having difficulty in biting the bullet that stakeholder pensions will have to be compulsory if they are to work. If they are not compulsory, it is clear that people will not willingly sacrifice some 12 per cent. of today's income when they know that the state will have to look after them if they do not do so. The Government have had advice to that effect from almost all the professional bodies that they have consulted, but they are reluctant to introduce compulsory arrangements, so they are dithering.

When I talked to people who voted for the Labour party at the previous election, I found that many—in particular, surprisingly, young people—are most disillusioned by the Government's failure to get on with pension reforms and their stakeholder pension proposals.

It is a great disappointment to the country and to hon. Members in all parts of the House that a Government with such a large majority and mandate have failed to get on with the welfare reforms that they painted in a vision for the nation. They have been sidetracked into the Chancellor's specific redistribution programme, and I fear that they have now lost the initiative until the next election.

9.15 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): We are debating an Opposition motion which claims that the Government have wasted their first year in office and failed to reform the social security system. I find that an intriguing notion when we compare our inheritance from the previous 18 years of Conservative stewardship of the welfare state with the action that has been taken by the new Government in their first 12 months.

We have inherited a mess from the Tory Government. Millions of children are growing up in poverty. Millions of pensioners are living below the poverty line. There has been rising inequality between the richest and poorest pensioners and, if nothing changes, that will continue. Thousands of disabled people were written off to live on invalidity benefit with no hope for the future. Millions of lone parents were made scapegoats by the Conservatives simply because they are lone parents and left with no hope for the future. The establishment of the Child Support Agency, as I am sure all hon. Members know from their surgery experience, has created massive despair and distress among families throughout the country. There was also the scandal of pensions mis-selling, which the Conservative party encouraged and failed to stop when it realised the magnitude of the disaster that it had caused.

The Conservative party's 18-year stewardship was not only incompetent but vindictive, divisive and self-destructive. Indeed, it would have gone further. A pamphlet, entitled "Who Benefits?", written by the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), shows that, if the Conservatives had remained in government, they would have called for the effective abolition of the welfare state. The hon. Gentleman stated:

"We envisage a future system where welfare is paid out of private insurance contributions for the affluent majority, alongside a state benefit system which protects and caters for the needs of those for whom private insurance is not an option."

In effect, there would be one rule for the rich and another for the poor.

Mr. Loughton: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the Prime Minister's comments in the foreword to the Green Paper that was published in March, which state that the Government intend the welfare state to remain

"a low-grade safety net for the destitute"?

Mr. Hope: The hon. Gentleman has failed to understand, or even to read, the Green Paper on welfare reform, which is one of the most radical documents to emerge from any Government this century. It takes forward a programme of welfare reform that will enhance people's lives and help not just those who have to rely on the welfare state for their income but the whole community. It is essential that a welfare state not only meets the needs of those in poverty but has the full support of the whole community—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) must behave himself.

Mr. Hope: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Having inherited that appalling crisis, the Government have had to do two things simultaneously: first, they have had to act immediately to tackle the poverty that they inherited; and, secondly, they have had to lay down the foundation for a new direction for the welfare state in preparation for the next millennium.

Mr. Rendel: I am interested in the idea that the Government acted immediately to overcome the poverty that they inherited. Is that why they cut lone parent benefit?

Mr. Hope: It might have been helpful if the hon. Gentleman had waited until I had finished speaking about the action that the Government have taken in their first 12 months in office to tackle the crisis that they inherited from the Conservatives. For example, in the Budget we increased child benefit by £2.50 a head per week for families whose oldest child is under the age of 11. That is the highest increase since child benefit was introduced.

We have introduced the working families tax credit and the child care tax credit, which, combined, mean that the poorest 20 per cent. of families will be on average £500 a year better off. For young people whose lives were decimated by the Conservatives and who were thrown on the scrap heap when they left school, we have introduced the new deal, which provides them with jobs, training, opportunities and hope for the future.

For parents, we have introduced the national child care strategy, which will provide affordable and accessible child care. It will enable parents—whether they are lone parents or two-parent families—to work and earn income to lift their families out of poverty. We have provided a new deal specifically targeted at lone parents, which many hon. Members have already said is a successful programme of support to help lone parents to work. The White Paper on "Fairness at Work" spells out a range of family-friendly policies to enable parents to work.

Another group that was hammered by the Conservatives in their 18 years of stewardship of the welfare state is the disabled. We have introduced the new deal for disabled people, to help those who can work to get off the dole and into work. We have introduced the disabled person's tax credit to give disabled people a fair wage, so that they have a decent income on which to live. We have made a commitment in the Green Paper on welfare reform to provide universal disability living allowance and attendance allowance. Moreover, a disability rights commission will be set up to establish firm rights in terms of security of employment and services for disabled people.

We have introduced winter fuel payments of £20 for all pensioner households and £50 for all pensioner households on income support. That is universal support, targeted to meet the needs of the poorest. In addition, we have cut VAT on fuel, which was introduced by the Conservatives when they were in power, and introduced a zero rating on the gas levy.

Those are tangible benefits for disabled people, pensioners, children, parents and young people, all of whom were left in despair by the previous Government. Naturally, we must plan for the long term. Action is needed not just to tackle poverty here and now, but to prevent poverty from returning in the future.

I have already referred to the welfare reforms outlined in the Green Paper published earlier this year, which contains clear principles and a new direction to eliminate poverty in the future while tackling poverty today.

The Green Paper on the Child Support Agency also introduces radical reforms. One of its outcomes will be to raise the incomes of parents on benefit by £10 a week, as they will get the first £10 of maintenance that is paid. That is extra money for the caring parents in a relationship.

There is to be a new Bill on pension sharing to help divorced women and to ensure that they are not disadvantaged when they reach pensionable age. As other hon. Members have said, we also have new proposals to tackle benefit fraud.

Much more important, the combination of all those measures—active communities, programmes, welfare state support and the new deal—will mean that people will be in work, self-sufficient, with incomes that make work pay. There will be voluntary action, with active citizenship and new schemes such as the millennium volunteers, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is introducing, and which will engage young people—and older people, in years to come—in actively supporting and regenerating their community. Reform of the welfare state is not only about income, but about people's lives—people having the confidence, ability and independence to live positive lives.

Much remains to be done. I look forward to the Green Paper on pension reform—which will introduce the new, value-for-money stakeholder pension and the new citizenship pension, which will cut the routes to pensioner poverty for women—because we need a pensions strategy for the future that can cope with a slowly aging society without placing a burden of unsustainable costs on our children.

I believe that, far from its having been a wasted year, as the Conservative motion suggests, the Government have begun to tackle the poverty that we inherited from the previous Government. They have also laid the foundations for wide-ranging reform to regenerate the lives of the families in most need and build a new welfare state, which has the support of the whole community.

9.25 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): The debate has been most interesting, because of what it has revealed about the gap between analysis and delivery. The hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) gave an eloquent disquisition on what he regarded as the major disadvantages of the welfare system that the Government inherited. Although many of us do not go the whole way with him in his attribution of cause, many Opposition Members, as well as Labour Members, would agree with him that the welfare state, as the Government encountered it on coming to office, was deficient.

The Minister for Welfare Reform wrote a series of pamphlets and books describing what he saw as the root cause of that deficiency. Many Conservative Members read those words, and I believe that we even understood them. More—we were persuaded by much of what is in them that, at root, there is a severe disadvantage in a welfare system that is a compound of means tests, a compound of disincentives and a compound of misincentives.

We understood that, when the present Government came to power, with the present Opposition in place, there was an historic opportunity—an opportunity to follow on from that analysis by delivering a new type of welfare state, a welfare state that would not be a compound of such disincentives and misincentives because it would not have a plethora of means tests attached. It would have learnt the lessons of the past.

What has been interesting about the debate is the fact that no Labour Member has even attempted—I know that the Minister wants to speak urgently; perhaps he will make such an attempt, but I doubt it—to argue that the past year shows even the beginnings of such a radical overhaul. On the contrary, the Secretary of State told us at considerable length about marginal acts—acts which, on her reckoning, will affect 1 per cent. of lone parents, or which will slightly ameliorate the circumstances of old-age pensioners by helping them to pay their heating bills. They may or may not be important measures. They may or may not work. In any case, they cannot conceivably be represented, and they were not represented by the Secretary of State or by any other Labour Member, as deep or radical measures to change the structure of the welfare state.

That is sad, not only because the Government might have made such radical changes, but because the official Opposition would have worked with the Government to do that. It was perhaps the first time in British history since the war when a Government and an Opposition largely shared an analysis, and might have worked together to convert that analysis into action. That opportunity has been missed.

It is worse than that, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) amply illustrated, in many respects—from the best of intentions, as has so often been the case—the Government have actually worsened the misincentives and disincentives. The apparatus of the working families tax credit and everything that goes with it deepen the extent of the disincentives to work and the misincentives vis-a-vis the family. My hon. Friend could have gone on to provide other examples. If I had the time, I would do so myself.

The tragedy is that the actions of the DSS over the past year have been governed by something outwith the Department that has nothing to do with the vision of the Minister for Welfare Reform. What is that outside force? It is, of course, the Treasury. What has happened to the Government is sad, but not unusual. The Department of Social Security has been bowled over and pushed to the ground by a Chancellor who has his own agenda, which has nothing to do with welfare reform in the radical sense.

I fear, therefore, that there will be no change and no eloquent defence from the Under-Secretary, because there cannot be change in the face of the force of the Chancellor, and there cannot be eloquent defence when the Under-Secretary knows that he would never be allowed to do anything that the radical programme of his right hon. Friend might have suggested that he should do. That is one of the great sadnesses which, for many Opposition Members, will abide throughout the lifetime of this Government.

9.30 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): This debate, although much too short, has proved to be revealing. We have had some interesting and memorable contributions.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who is generally regarded as an extremely able Chairman of his Select Committee, made

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

a number of good points, several of which I agree with. He made some telling criticisms of the Government and one or two criticisms of the Conservative party. I do not accept, however, that we should not have chosen today for the debate. He said that we should have waited for the Chancellor's statement tomorrow.

The official Opposition understand the Labour Government a good deal better than the Liberal party evidently does. The Labour Government always bypass Parliament; they never make policy statements to Parliament first. If one wants to know what policy statements will be made, one must read the press over the previous few days. If one wants to hold a debate while the matter is still active in the public mind, one must hold it the day before, not the day after, the relevant statement. If the hon. Gentleman wanted to know what the Chancellor will say tomorrow, all he had to do was read the Sunday newspapers yesterday. That is a regrettable state of affairs, and I agree that it is part of the perversion of the government of this country that has been brought about by the new Labour Government. I deeply regret it, but we have unfortunately to respond to such realities, unpleasant though they are.

The hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), as he always does on such occasions, made a thoughtful speech, with feeling and considerable experience of these matters. I agree with much of what he said. My instincts, like his, are against means-testing. There is an interesting divide in the House. The hon. Gentleman, and my hon. Friends and I, are against means testing, as is the Minister for Welfare Reform.

In his book "Making Welfare Work", the Minister for Welfare Reform states:

> "A political party must first recognise how dire the problem is, acknowledge its scale, and set out a strategy which aims to replace means-tested dependency."

On one side, we have an interesting coalition between the right hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Croydon, North and Opposition Members, and on the other side the Secretary of State and the Chancellor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) made an excellent speech, setting out in graphic detail the perverse effect of the welfare system on the family, and its equally perverse effect in encouraging cheating.

The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope), who seems to have left the Chamber, made a speech which, I imagine, was delivered to him by Millbank tower. When he spoke of 18 years of Conservative government decimating people's lives, he was so over the top as to be utterly ludicrous. No more need be said about him.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made a characteristically forensic speech and, in a few minutes, succeeded in showing up some of the fatal contradictions in the policy positions taken up by the new Labour Government—and they will prove fatal.

Much the most revealing speech was made by the Secretary of State. I fear that it was clearly a valedictory speech, and it would be inhuman not to sympathise with someone who is about to be fired, for whatever reason. It is only right to allow anyone who is about to be fired a certain latitude in what she says by way of self-justification.

The right hon. Lady said, "No one will ever go back on the system that I have created." That was a pretentiousness too far. She obviously has a vision of the history of welfare in this country which involves Lloyd George, Beveridge, Chamberlain, Macmillan—I am glad that the hon. Member for Croydon, North mentioned Macmillan in that context—and then Harman. Perhaps she has a vision of the welfare history of the human race which involves Bismarck and Beveridge—and Harman. No doubt she regards her achievements of the past 14 months as eclipsing everything that all those statesman of the past ever dreamed of achieving.

The Secretary of State's imagination matches the extent of the disappointment felt by her colleagues about what she has achieved over the past 14 months, because she was given the important task of delivering three major new Labour promises. The first was comprehensive reform of the welfare system, the second was to decrease the share of national income spent

"on the bills of . . . social failure"—

a reduction of the proportion of national income represented by social security spending—and the third was to deliver a range of enormously bold, extravagant and, I fear, entirely cynical promises to the older members of our society, and to old-age pensioners in particular.

What has the Secretary of State delivered? She has delivered a memorable administrative failure. We have heard this evening about cheques going out and bouncing, and cheques going out two or three times and being cashed, costing the public purse a lot of money. That may seem like small beer, but it shows the general spirit in the Department which she is supposedly administering.

We heard most from the Secretary of State about the one project that she appears to have brought forward—the new deal for lone parents, which so enthused lone parents that three quarters of them did not even bother to respond to letters inviting them to interview. We have agreed that the success rate is about 1 per cent. or, at most, 1.5 per cent. The right hon. Lady was extremely revealing in refusing to tell me, following an intervention, what are her targets; if she has none, she clearly has no control and no way of measuring the success or otherwise of the project. She has reinforced the impression gained by many of us over the past few months that this is nothing more than a gimmick, and a rather cruel gimmick, at the expense of single parents.

On comprehensive welfare reform, we have had a joke—a vacuous document called, again pretentiously, "New Ambitions For Our Country: A New Contract For Welfare". There is no new contract in the content, which is full of platitudes and questions, but has no substance at all. We shall never know whether the Minister for Welfare Reform had a real project in the paper that he put up to the Prime Minister last September, which was emasculated. Such a project is certainly not what has been provided to the British public.

What has happened in respect of reduced social security spending? The Labour Government are more than a year into their term of office, and they have gone in the opposite direction. The working families tax credit could cost up to £4 billion, and although getting people to claim benefits to which they are entitled, such as income support for pensioners, may be a desirable objective, it has a positive cost—about £2 billion, on the Government's own

figures. All those measures increase social security spending, whereas the Government were elected to reduce it.

Where are we after 14 months? The Government are going backwards: they are not fulfilling their programme. They have an even longer distance to travel in their remaining three or, if they are lucky, nearly four years in government. The scepticism in the country about whether they can fulfil those objectives as well as the other pledges in their manifesto is steadily increasing.

The right hon. Lady was appointed to fulfil a third set of objectives: the promises to older people. Throughout the last Parliament, the Labour party held out the prospect that, if they were returned to office, they would index the state retirement pension to earnings and not to prices.

Ms Harman: No, we did not.

Mr. Davies: The right hon. Lady shakes her head because it was not in the manifesto, but she knows that that is what hundreds of her colleagues were saying for years before the last election and during the election campaign. That has been a sad disappointment to millions of people who voted for the Labour party at the last election, and who had subtly been led to believe by all the spin doctoring that a Labour Government would index pensions to earnings, whereas they never had the faintest intention of doing so.

The Labour party said in its manifesto:

"We will support and strengthen the framework for occupational pensions."

It has done exactly the reverse of its explicit manifesto commitment.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I cannot give way to the hon. Lady now. If she had tried to intervene a little earlier, I would have been happy to give way to her.

Shona McIsaac: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I understand that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) receives remuneration from National Westminster Securities. National Westminster sells pensions. I believe that he should not have put his name to the motion, nor should take part in the debate if he intends to mention pensions. At the very least, he should declare that interest to the House.

Madam Speaker: Those are matters for the Commissioner and not for debate. I presume that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has entered that information in the Register of Members' Interests.

Mr. Davies: Of course that interest is registered. Occupational pensions are not usually referred to in such debates. Many people have them, but I do not have one with National Westminster. If the Labour party was so worried about my remarks that it put someone up to make such a footling, time-wasting point, I must have been scoring a few runs.

Whereas the Labour Government were elected on an explicit programme of strengthening the framework for occupational pensions, they have done the exact reverse. They have taxed occupational pensions in an unprecedented fashion. They are taking £5 billion a year out of personal and occupational pensions through the abolition of the dividend tax credit. They discriminated against occupational pensions as against personal pensions by not increasing the SERPS rebate to occupational pensions. It is not surprising that, as a result of a year of the Labour Government, the occupational pensions movement is declining. That is a great tragedy for our future, and one more broken promise.

The Labour manifesto said that we need higher levels of saving to provide decent retirement incomes. Once again, the Government have broken their promise. They need higher levels of saving, but they have taxed savings. That is hardly sensible.

The House hears almost every day of a new, broken Labour promise. We have heard of at least two today. Much of the talk today, of course, has been about a broken promise involving tuition fees but, over and over again, promises to older and more vulnerable people have been broken.

Let me close with one final new Labour broken promise. On 18 August 1995, the then shadow employment Minister wrote to a number of organisations representing the interests of retired people, saying:

"Tony Blair has asked me to respond to your letter . . . regarding age discrimination in employment, in my capacity as Shadow Employment Minister . . . the next Labour Government will introduce legislation to make age discrimination illegal, just as discrimination on the grounds of race and sex are today."

We have not heard a word about that commitment, 14 months into the new Labour Government.

I ask the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham)—who will wind up the debate, and who has responsibility for pensioners, or purports to—to tell the House now whether that commitment is still valid, or whether it is one of the many promises that the Labour Government have broken. Those promises have been broken cynically, but not with impunity, because the public are not so easily fooled. If the record of the past 14 months continues, there is no doubt that there will be a record of broken promises at the time of the next election such as no voter has so far seen.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. John Denham): After that speech, I begin to fear that rumours of a black market in Viagra may well be true. I hope that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) will calm down before he goes home.

This has been a surprisingly good debate, in which a number of substantial contributions have been made. As we would expect, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) provided a good historical overview, and was able to set the record of the last Administration in a wider context. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) spoke of the importance of—among other issues—the staff employed by the Benefits Agency to the delivery of the welfare system that we want. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) set out the history of the last Administration very clearly, and the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), the Chairman of the Social Security Select Committee, made a series of valuable contributions.

[Mr. John Denham]

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) also made some interesting points that were worthy of consideration. Although I do not agree with his prediction of the behaviour that would result from the working families tax credit, his was a thoughtful speech. His speech was about what the Government were doing. The premise of the debate called by his right hon. and hon. Friends was that the Government were not doing anything, and the only two speeches that were devoid of content, point or substance were those made by Opposition Front Benchers.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) summed it up very well when he said that, yet again, an Opposition day debate on social security had turned into an own goal. I noted the speed with which Conservative Members left the Chamber as soon as the opening speeches were over. I do not think that I have ever attended an Opposition day debate, in six years as a Member of Parliament, at which the only two members of the party that called the debate who were present were on the Front Bench. That, I think, is a measure of where the debate was leading at the opening—although a number of hon. Members in all parties developed it into quite a useful discussion.

It is a shame. The procedures of the House give the Opposition a chance to scrutinise and criticise the Government's record, and I do not think that any Government—certainly this Government—should be concerned about that; but these debates are a test of not just the Government's record, but the Opposition—of whether they have anything to say, whether they have a case to make and whether they can tell us, as they singularly failed to do, what they would have done.

The motion criticises welfare spending. The Conservative party should know because, under the previous Administration, social security spending spiralled and the costs of economic and social failure soared. The cost of social security soared by £43 billion in real terms—*[Interruption.]* Let me tell the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) what we said in our manifesto:

"We will increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure."

Over this Parliament, this Government will keep that election manifesto commitment—I am confident that we shall do so—but he must justify the previous Government's record.

Nearly 20 years ago, taxpayers knew that 25p in every pound that the Government spent went to health and education and 23p to social security. By the time that we were elected last year, 31p in every pound of Government spending was going on social security, but it would be wrong to judge the previous Government just by what they spent. What matters just as much is what happened to millions of people—to individuals, to parents, to children. Not just the cost, but the number of people who were being failed soared.

The number of people on income support doubled from one in 12 to one in six. By the time the previous Administration had finished, twice as many households had no one in work as when they were elected. The number of children being brought up on benefit had doubled: 2 million children of 1 million lone parents alone were being brought up on benefit. Nearly 1 million extra people of working age were receiving incapacity benefit.

That was a welfare system that was not working. It was not working for our society—a society that bore the costs of social exclusion, of young people who thought that they had no stake in our society. It was not working for taxpayers, who had to pay the bill. It was not working for many of those who had to rely on it.

We knew that that was not the welfare system that people in Britain wanted—whether they were paying for it, or dependent on it. We knew that the benefit system alone could not be the route out of poverty for so many children of so many parents on benefits, and I believe that they knew it was not the route out of poverty too.

We knew that 2 million disabled people of working age were working, but that another 1 million disabled people wanted to work. However, no one was giving them the chance to work, to enjoy equal rights and to feel that they were being treated as full members of society. We knew that the system was not working for those people who could not be expected to work because of their health or disability, or because they were retired. We knew that people who had to turn to the welfare system found that it did not seem to be working for them.

Too many people came to believe that they had more opportunity to commit benefit fraud than of earning an honest living. The previous Administration said that they wanted a benefit system where people helped themselves; they did. The organised gangs, the crooked landlords and, sadly, a minority of individual claimants helped themselves, and the previous Government did nothing about it.

The benefit system treated people only as claimants, not as individuals with hopes, aspirations and ambitions for themselves and their families. People did not get what they were entitled to. Perhaps 1 million pensioners, after a lifetime of work, bringing up families and living through war, did not receive even the income support to which they were entitled.

Therefore, as soon as we were elected, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security, with a whole ministerial team—

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman did not give way in his speech, so I do not intend to give way in mine.

We set about changing and reforming the welfare system to make a reality of our principles and values: work for those who can and security for those who cannot. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said that we had made and are making no changes, but that is not true.

I make no apologies for the fact that one of this Government's first actions was to invest in new opportunities for people who had been denied opportunities for too long. We invested the windfall tax on the privatised utilities to create new opportunities for young people, for older workers, for lone parents and for the sick and disabled. We gave young people the chance to have a job, to gain skills and to be a full part of society. At the same time—not in the welfare budget, but in the education budget—we invested to raise standards in skills, so that, as today's children grow up, they do not leave our schools with the same lack of skills, education and qualifications that their older brothers and sisters have faced.

We are extending the new deal's opportunities also to older people—who also should not be written off by the welfare system. We have set out to discover the best ways of enabling sick and disabled people to keep their jobs and to return to work. This week, we shall be announcing the first pilot projects in that programme.

In the new deal—which has been championed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—we have said to lone parents, "There is an alternative to receiving benefit until your youngest child is 16. You can have a personal adviser who will work with you in dealing with the complexities of looking for work for the first time in years—to sort out training and child care and to understand working benefits."

In the welfare reform Green Paper, which was introduced in the House by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform, we have stated how the welfare system itself needs to be developed—so that the principle of personal advice tailored to the needs of individuals becomes a reality across the welfare system. We are also establishing schemes that will bring the Benefits Agency and local authorities together so that people are not faced with different systems and bureaucracies that cannot talk to one another.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) said that the Government are not moving ahead with technology. I tell him that people can now ring up to claim their pension. Someone will be at a computer screen to enter the information and send out a completed form. That is only the beginning of our plans. In nine pilot schemes—*[Interruption.]* There is some laughter among Opposition Members. Before implementation of the new system, about 40 per cent. of pension claims made on paper and posted had to be returned for extra information—at an administrative cost to the taxpayer, and a cost in inconvenience to pensioners. Using the new system, over 90 per cent. of new claims are accurate. [HON. MEMBERS: "What about the cheques?"] I shall deal with the cheques in a moment.

It is so symptomatic of the Conservative party's thinking that Conservative Members deride an improvement in service quality that helps to make the welfare system work for individuals and to cut the cost to the taxpayer. Now we know why so little happened over the Tory years.

Opposition Members asked about cheques, and said that people were worried about winter fuel payments not arriving. Under the previous Administration, for 18 years, no pensioner ever worried about winter fuel payments arriving—but they worried about their fuel bills, and about VAT on fuel at 17.5 per cent. Over 18 years, they never made an effort to help every pensioner household with its fuel bills. We have made that effort.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford may think that the fact that one employee of a private company administering benefits transposed two digits and sent out some cheques that were changed within 72 hours should provide the basis for an Opposition day debate, but that just shows the ridiculousness of the Opposition's critique. Conservative Members did not mention a word of how they did not do anything to help pensioners with their heating bills or utter a word of apology for attempting to impose VAT on fuel at 17.5 per cent. They have only words of derision for the changes that we have already made to create a benefits system that works for people. Conservative Members stand condemned by their own words.

I should like to ask Conservative Members a key question. For years, they derided Labour Members when we said that we should use modern technology to help the poorest pensioners. However, one week into our pilot scheme, we identified a Scottish pensioner who was entitled to income support. We encouraged her to claim that benefit and now, consequently, she is £51 a week better off. When Conservative Members tabled today's motion criticising our welfare spending—the House is entitled to know the answer to this question—did they want that woman to stop getting that money? Was it that pensioner whom they intended to criticise? Should that pensioner, so long neglected by the Opposition, go without once again? That is what lies behind their message this evening. Should the lone parents who are on average £39 a week better off, with the taxpayer saving £42 a week—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 128, Noes 360.

Division No. 334] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter

Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wiltshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverhton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael

Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Warsing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John McFall and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MADAM SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House congratulates the Government for their outstanding record in pursuing their efforts to provide opportunities for those who can work and security for those who cannot, to cut expenditure on economic and social failure and to modernise the welfare system.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Teaching and Higher Education Bill *[Lords]* may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.— *[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

10.15 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I know that you are sensitive to the rights of Back Benchers and of Parliament. May I draw your attention to the fact that statutory instrument 1998 No. 1673, which is on today's Votes and Proceedings, is not available in the Vote Office? You will agree that that is, to say the least, unfortunate, and an unforgivable omission by the responsible Department. Members of Parliament are entitled to be able to go to the Vote Office to obtain papers listed.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. The instrument was laid on Friday, and "Erskine May" tells me that, when such drafts or instruments are laid, copies should be made available as soon as possible. Perhaps the Government will see to it that the instrument is made available.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I have dealt with that point of order.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have for some years been trying to get Departments to answer letters from Members of Parliament within a sensible time. A week ago, I put down a series of questions to all Ministers asking how long it was taking them to reply, what targets had been set, and how often targets were being achieved. Seven days later, I have had answers from several Departments to the effect that they will write to me shortly.

The more complicated matter on which I seek your advice is that several Ministers have referred me to an answer given today by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. However, it is 10.20 pm and I have yet to receive that answer. Neither the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster nor his deputy knew that they were supposed to be answering that question. Members of Parliament are being referred to an answer that is not available. Can you help the Minister or me by saying how Ministers should reply to parliamentary questions and letters from Members?

Madam Speaker: I think that there is a further point of order.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Dr. David Clark): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) has just brought the matter to my attention. I will look into it, and I will let him have a reply within 24 hours.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Is this a separate point of order to the previous one, on which I gave a ruling?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It is about the statutory instrument, which names a constituent of mine. A point of order has been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), but it relates to my constituent, and this is the second time that the same thing has happened.

Madam Speaker: The point relates to the Food (Cheese) (Emergency Control) (Amendment No. 2) Order 1998 (SI, 1998, No. 1673).

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Yes, and it is my constituent's livelihood that is at stake. In May, when the order was first laid, there was the same failure to notify the House or me. An apology was given by the Minister of State, Department of Health, who said that that failure resulted from the urgency of the matter. That was two months ago.

The Government have had plenty of time to work out whether the matter is urgent. The second order that is laid pursuant to this should be notified to me as the constituency Member of Parliament and to the House. I put it to you, Madam Speaker, that this is not simply a discourtesy, but a contempt of the House. I suggest also that it is a discourtesy to you that this continues to occur despite verbal apologies from the Department concerned.

Madam Speaker: It is hardly contempt of the House. If the right hon. Gentleman claims that it is contempt of the House, I must have that in writing. I hope that I have given something of a reprimand in making the point that, as the statutory instrument was laid on Friday, "Erskine May" tells us that it should be available in the Vote Office. I ask for that to occur before the rising of the House tonight.

Orders of the Day

Teaching and Higher Education Bill *[Lords]*

Lords amendment considered.

Clause 25

IMPOSITION OF CONDITIONS AS TO FEES AT FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SCOTLAND

10.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees to the Amendment proposed by the Lords in lieu of the words left out of the Bill in page 22, lines 31 to 39.

Madam Speaker: I inform the House that the Lords amendment in lieu of the words so left out of the Bill involves privilege.

Mr. Blunkett: I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and his hon. Friends for the enormous patience that they have shown in recent weeks during the to-ing and fro-ing between this place and the House of Lords. It has been a travesty to see in the newspapers and hear in debates in the other place signs of the failure to understand the Government's proposition in terms of four-year degree courses in Scotland. Intelligent people should understand clearly why we have introduced the measure. They signally fail to understand that we have done so precisely because there are different education and legal systems in Scotland, and then criticise us for taking action that underpins and underlines that distinction. It is frankly breathtaking.

The House listened to the views of the upper House when we returned again and again to this aspect of the Teaching and Higher Education Bill. For that reason, I do not intend to detain the House for long tonight. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame."] However, I must clearly detain the House long enough in order to explain to those Opposition Members who are shouting, "Shame," why we are carrying through this proposition, and why the motion carried by the House of Lords would create anomalies that would be much worse than those claimed in relation to our proposition.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I will when I have made some progress.

If the Scottish education system is different—and we all accept that it is—if four-year courses are the norm because highers last for a year, as opposed to A-levels, which last for two years, and if, therefore, there is a different system that takes account—

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): You have lost the House.

Mr. Blunkett: I fear not; the only person that I have lost is the hon. Gentleman.

If there is a programme of four-year degrees in Scotland in order to reflect the situation in terms of highers, if our proposition reflects the need to take account of that difference—which was picked up by Sir Ron Garrick in the report that he produced at the time of the Dearing inquiry—and if Lord Dearing has said, including in speeches in the House of Lords, that his report recommends that the distinction should be recognised and built into law, is it surprising to anyone that the Government should reflect the Garrick inquiry and Lord Dearing's recommendations, and act upon them?

Does it surprise anyone that we took action to ensure that the fourth year in Scotland was seen as different from that in England, Wales or Northern Ireland? I would have thought not, but as Opposition Members are clearly unconvinced, and want to pass something different, I would like to explain why we shall not accept that.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman started his explanation by noting that the university system is Scotland is different from that in the rest of United Kingdom, and in one sense it is. Why were my constituents, 2 per cent. of whom end up each year in Scottish universities, given the same application form to cover Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland? The same Universities and Colleges Admissions Service system processes their applications. If the systems are so different, why has there always been a common system for application to university, allowing students to choose their courses on the basis of their suitability?

Mr. Blunkett: That explains why we are having some difficulty in outlining the difference to Opposition Members. It is not a question of the simplicity of the administration of application, but of the extent, level and timing of tuition. That is the difference between the English, Welsh and Northern Irish and the Scottish systems. We are talking about an historic difference in education systems, and narrowing the differences in respect of the likely expenditure that students will have to incur. That was the difference that the Dearing and Garrick committees wanted to be reflected, and it is the difference that we are reflecting. To do otherwise would create other anomalies.

If someone from Northumberland went to Newcastle with an amendment passed to reflect the fourth year in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, we would create an enormous anomaly. It would result in 60,000 people taking four-year degrees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland complaining that the anomaly affected them rather than a small number of students who go to Scottish universities from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): If we are to accept the right hon. Gentleman's argument that there should be an anomaly for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, given that we have debated the matter on several occasions and that it is important that the facts are laid before the House, will he take us through, country by country, the anomaly of why the education systems of France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Portugal, Spain, Belgium and the rest of them make them eligible for a means-tested tuition fee, but not England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Lady misses the point. We are not talking about the education systems of France or Portugal but of Scotland.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Ask for a better briefing.

Mr. Blunkett: I have a perfectly good briefing. To carry through the recommendations of Dearing and Garrick, because the United Kingdom is part of the European Union, we must reflect on what happens in the home countries in terms of European Union entitlement. It ill becomes the Liberal Democrats, who are great enthusiasts for Europe, to use as a stick to beat us the inevitable outcome that we must acknowledge students from Europe. I want to explain to the House just how big an anomaly it really is.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I shall, when I have explained just how many students are affected by what our opponents describe as the European anomaly.

In 1996–97, there were precisely 350 students in their fourth year in Scottish universities from other European nations. Is it worth overturning the European issue, which is exercising Opposition Members and the House of Lords, in order to create a much bigger anomaly, whereby we would inevitably be accused of discriminating in favour of a young person doing a four-year degree course in Scotland, rather than in England, Wales or Northern Ireland?

We cannot afford as a nation to create a new anomaly that would inevitably cost us at least £27 million to take account of four-year degrees in the remaining countries of the United Kingdom. We simply could not do it. Twenty-seven million pounds is a convincing sum in terms of opening up access to students throughout the UK who are currently being encouraged to take up university places.

10.30 pm

Mr. Beith: Will the Secretary of State explain to students and potential students in Northumberland why what is perceived as a potential unfairness in relation to students from other European Union member countries is not recognised by the Government as an unfairness in relation to the inhabitants of Northumberland when they find themselves, not in two different universities, but in the same university as students who are paying £1,000 less in tuition fees for the same course—who, in some cases, would be students with whom they had gone to school, and who lived only a few miles from where they lived?

Mr. Blunkett: Because to do otherwise than we propose would result in the anomaly of which the right hon. Gentleman is perfectly aware—that exemption would apply to a student from his constituency who went to Edinburgh or Dundee, but not to a student who went to Newcastle. It is as simple—*[Interruption.]* It is as simple

[Mr. Blunkett]

as that. I shall repeat—*[Interruption.]*—I shall repeat it again, because Opposition Members are so intent on shouting out after a good supper that they cannot understand the point: to do other than we propose would result in the right hon. Gentleman's constituents in Northumberland finding themselves able to be exempt from fees if they went north of the border, but not if they went to Newcastle.

That would create an entirely new anomaly affecting all four-year courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. If the House believes that that is an anomaly when it affects 350 students from Europe, what about the anomaly affecting 60,000 students from the rest of the United Kingdom? That is what it amounts to.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I shall in a moment.

Precisely because we have had so much difficulty explaining to Members of this House and of the House of Lords why one tiny anomaly relating to European students should not be replaced by a very substantial anomaly relating to all four-year degrees throughout the country, and precisely because we do not appear yet to have managed to get the message across that, in any case, those who are not so well off will already be exempt from, or will have ameliorated, the fourth-year expenditure in Scotland if their income is insufficient to meet it—for those reasons, I want to offer a way forward tonight.

Mr. Rendel: Will the Secretary of State give way now?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman must have been in the House long enough to know that intervening on me at the moment when I am about to say something that might be of interest to him is not the best way of encouraging me to deliver it.

We have said throughout the proceedings on the Bill that we are prepared to monitor the impact of the changes that we are introducing. That is why, to enable Members of this House and the House of Lords to reflect on the alternatives and the anomalies that they would probably create, I offer, with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland, the opportunity to have an independent review early next year to examine how our proposals for the Scottish fourth-year exemption are working. That review would monitor the impact—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The House must listen to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Blunkett: I am giving hon. Members a little time so that the wine and whisky can quieten them a little.

We propose to offer an independent review to take account of those entering Scottish universities this year and early applications for next year. It could also take account of the views of Opposition parties—if they so wish—the Scottish higher education principals, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and others on the alternatives that they consider might be better. That is not rubbish; it is not to be dismissed. It will give the other place and Opposition parties in this House the chance to state what action they want to be taken and to acknowledge what would be the impact of that action. That review would take place far in advance of any student reaching the fourth year under the new system.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Will the Secretary of State's acknowledgement that there may be some merit in the opposition to the proposal lead the Government to say that they will not try to reverse the Lords amendments, but accept them unless and until they are convinced that they are right and everybody else is wrong?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I shall not say that, for several important reasons. The most important reason is that, when an unelected House attempts again and again to overturn the declared will of an elected Chamber, it is always the democratic elected Chamber that must succeed in putting through its policies. In the end, whether or not the House of Lords believes that it is right, that its wisdom is greater than ours and that the anomalies that it would create are fewer than the ones that it criticises us for creating, this House must account to the British people.

This House must stand or fall by what it does. This House will, in the end, have to take responsibility for the outcome. That is why this House, on behalf of the democratic constitution of our country and the people who elected us, has to succeed in having its way. That is why we shall overturn the Lords amendment, and, if the Lords send it back to us again, we will overturn it again. That is why this House must always prevail over the unelected House next door.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I begin by welcoming the Secretary of State, because so far he has not played a conspicuous role in the debate on this matter. We hoped that, as he had deigned to contribute to the discussion of the Scottish anomaly, we might have a prospect of making progress. The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, has come to the Chamber several times with feeble and unconvincing arguments, and we hoped that the Secretary of State could come up with something better. That hope was further encouraged when we read some briefing—I do not know whose ministerial office it was faxed from—in last week's *Financial Times*. The journalist wrote:

"In a sign the government has been rattled, David Blunkett, the education secretary, will lead a mission 'to explain' in Monday's crucial debate in the House of Commons. He takes over from Brian Wilson, Scottish Office spokesman, who is thought to have underperformed on the so-called 'Scottish anomaly'."

He has under-performed, has he? This issue led to the second biggest rebellion in this Chamber since the election, apart from the single parent vote, and the biggest defeat for the Government in the Lords since 1913, which, come to think of it, was a year after the Titanic under-performed as well.

Mr. Blunkett: I know that we have introduced a numeracy programme, but I should have thought that even the Opposition could count. Only one Labour Member voted against on the previous occasion.

Mr. Willetts: The rebellions, which included 31 Labour Members on one occasion, were against proposals put forward by the Secretary of State under the Bill.

The Secretary of State now steps in and appears to offer a crack of light. We are told that the door is ajar, inasmuch as we shall get a review, but we are not told whether he is willing to accept the fundamental point of principle—whether he understands the anger that is caused by the idea that two students studying side by side, doing the same course at the same university, should pay different tuition fees simply because of where they happen to live within the United Kingdom. That is the point of principle which the Secretary of State has signally failed to address tonight.

The review seems to involve students from England, Wales or Northern Ireland applying for places at Scottish universities without knowing whether they face three or four years' fees. That is not a reasonable basis on which any student should be asked to apply.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Are not the Government trying to pick up on the Dearing report, in which a three-year degree course in England and Wales takes four years in Scotland? If a course takes four years, whether a student comes from England or from Scotland, he or she still has to do four years, but the Government feel that they should pay only three years' tuition fees. Why are the Government so against following the logic of their own principles in this matter?

Mr. Willetts: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. What I find extraordinary is that the Secretary of State is now trying to defend a position that he did not advocate when he made his original statement on the matter to the House last July. I do not believe that he intended that there should be a Scottish anomaly when he first announced his alternative approach, on the very day of the Dearing report's publication. I think that this mess is caused entirely by the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office announcing a concession in October without clearing it with his colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment. The only explanation for the Government's obduracy is a row going on between that Department and the Scottish Office.

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Whether under-performing or over-performing, I was certainly performing well enough to see the hon. Gentleman off on the last occasion. Does he think that, when Lord Dearing and his committee made precisely the recommendation that we have acted on, they intended to create an anomaly or resolve one?

Mr. Willetts: All that I can say is that I am still leading for the Opposition on this subject, whereas the Minister is no longer leading for the Government, so it is pretty clear to me who has been under-performing.

The Dearing report is absolutely clear that

"this would be a matter for consideration by the Secretary of State for Scotland".

That is what Sir Ron Dearing said, and that is why we are inviting the Government to consider the matter again.

The only argument that we heard tonight was the claim that the anomaly would cost not £2 million, but £27 million. In other words, we were told that, instead of simply having to ensure equal treatment among students from England or Scotland at the same Scottish university, the Government would have to get rid of fourth-year tuition fees for every university in the United Kingdom. That is no part of our policy. I do not believe that that was the intention of any of the very many peers from all parts of the other place who voted against the Government. The argument is a complete red herring, because the two systems are indeed different. There is no reason why a regime that should apply to a Scottish university should also apply to an English university.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously asking the House to accept that a constituent of mine from Barking could attend a Scottish university and pay only three years of fees—not the fourth—whereas the same constituent, reading the same subject at an English university, would be expected to pay fees for the fourth year? Is he not, by his policy, creating a new set of anomalies?

10.45 pm

Mr. Willetts: All I can say is that they are different education systems. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] They are different education systems.

Mr. Blunkett: Is it not precisely the fact that Scottish students go through the Scottish education system and students in Barking do not that makes the difference between what the hon. Gentleman proposes and what we propose?

Mr. Willetts: No; that is not the case. That approach—the claim that the first year of the Scottish four-year university course exists only to allow students to catch up with English A-levels—produces great anger and irritation in people in the Scottish educational world. That is not the case, but what is? I quote the secretary of the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals, Ronald Crawford:

"The £27 million is a distraction. The four-year degree"

course

"is the norm in Scotland and it's the exception in the rest of the United Kingdom. It's inappropriate to consider the two analogously".

There is absolutely no need, therefore, for the principle of equal treatment of students at the same Scottish university to require that one also abandons fourth-year tuition fees at all English, Welsh and Northern Irish universities. That is why the concession would cost only £2 million.

The Secretary of State failed to explain on what basis he moved from contemplating having to concede on the Scottish anomaly to saying that he would have to make the wider concession in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Is he saying that it would be a legal requirement on him, as we were told at one point? We were told that, as soon as the matter went before the courts, he would be obliged to abandon fourth-year tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Is he saying that? If so, I must tell him that the courts would be familiar with the different higher education system in Scotland; they would understand perfectly that one was entitled to have a different regime in Scotland from that in England.

If the Secretary of State is not saying that it is a legal requirement, is he saying that it would have to be done as a matter of policy? The present Government are supposed to believe in devolution. They are the Government who are supposed to believe in allowing things to be different

[Mr. Willetts]

in Scotland from in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I do not see why any Minister should feel obliged to take a policy decision to enforce uniformity in that one small area of higher education when, throughout the rest of education and higher education in Scotland and England, the situation is different.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the argument that, above all, puts an end to that used by the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) is the fact that the Government have never argued that her former students in Islington, when they were secondary school pupils, could not go out of Islington, as many pupils did, to another education system, paid for by the taxpayer? That is exactly the same parallel in secondary education as in higher education, where people may choose where to go to advance their studies. The hon. Lady never previously argued that Islington 15-year-olds could go to school only in Islington.

Mr. Willetts: That is a very useful point, whatever it might mean.

I shall revert to the argument that I was developing. If the Secretary of State claims that he is on a slippery slope and that he cannot make a concession for a footling £2 million without being obliged to make a concession for £27 million, he should explain to the House where that requirement comes from. Is it a legal requirement? Is it a policy decision? Or is it a political judgment about the forces that he would face? Is he saying that the political campaigns around the country would be so powerful that he, a poor weakling of a politician, would immediately have to give way and abandon fourth-year tuition fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

I do not find that credible. I have a higher opinion of the Secretary of State than to believe that he would immediately give way on the £27 million. The argument that he is trying to use with the House of Lords is that he is such a tough guy and such a macho Secretary of State that he is willing to jeopardise his entire Bill, rather than pay £2 million to deal with a glaring, absurd anomaly facing students going to Scottish universities.

The only way in which the House could accept the argument advanced by the Secretary of State tonight is to believe two contradictory propositions—first, that the political pressures for an entirely different higher education system in England immediately to abandon fourth-year tuition fees would be so irresistible that the Secretary of State would give way, and secondly, that the Secretary of State is so tough and macho that he is willing to sacrifice his entire Bill, rather than make a £2 million concession.

I am prepared to believe one proposition or the other, but not both. The only way that the Secretary of State can win the argument tonight in the House is by maintaining that both are true.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): The hon. Gentleman referred to the anomalies which it is incumbent on the Secretary of State to resolve. Does he agree that, as the Secretary of State intends to set up an independent review, the best way of ensuring certainty would be to assure those entering Scottish universities this year that they would not have to pay fees in the fourth year, and that the review should be on the anomaly that the Secretary of State considers important and the extent to which it matters in the longer term?

Mr. Willetts: If the Government accepted that there should not be anomalous treatment of students attending Scottish universities, and undertook to review the evidence, having protected the status quo, that would be a different matter. Sadly, that was not the point that the Secretary of State made this evening.

We have heard much in the past few days about the Secretary of State's other responsibility. We have already heard some of the briefing about the statement that we shall hear from the Chancellor tomorrow. We may find that the Secretary of State himself comes to the House to tell us about the enormous sums that he claims are to be put into education in the next few years. We have read in the press about £15 billion of higher education expenditure over the next few years.

Will not the Secretary of State look a rather absurd figure if he pops up on our television screens explaining that he has secured billions of pounds of extra cash from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, yet it is impossible to spend £2 million to deal with an anomaly that makes no sense to anyone outside the whipped ranks of his own party?

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk) *rose—*

Mr. Willetts: No, I am about to finish.

If the Secretary of State is to be taken seriously when he speaks about the financial settlement that he is bringing to the House in the next few days, he cannot also maintain that £2 million to deal with such an anomaly is a concession that it is impossible for him to make.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): A lot of this is about perception. Many students at Scottish universities come from the north of Ireland, so how is it to be justified that a student from Belfast will pay £1,000 more than a student from Dublin? That raises the issue of the cement of the British universities system. Part of the cement that keeps the United Kingdom together is the universities, and anything that damages the Scottish universities as United Kingdom universities is a serious matter.

In the previous debate, I asked specific questions about the legal situation. I am entitled to say that the view of Edinburgh university, which comes through Sir Stewart Sutherland, the vice-chancellor, after the taking of legal advice, is that it is more than likely that the Government's view would not be sustained in a test case. I have also consulted Professor Anthony Bradley, a practising Queen's counsel, former editor of the *Journal of Public Law* and recently retired professor of constitutional law at the university of Edinburgh. This is what he put into print in the *Edinburgh Evening News* on Thursday 9 July:

"The Government's controversial plan for students' tuition fees could be destroyed by its commitment to European human rights".

That is the view of a QC. Although this is not the time to occupy the House with the detailed legal argument that some of us have heard, I must ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State two specific questions about the

review. I welcome the offer of a review and think that it will be helpful and constructive, but will he undertake that nothing will be done to charge existing students until, first, the review has reported and, secondly, there has been a test case in the courts to determine whether Professor Bradley and the university of Edinburgh, backed by Professor Ian Graham-Bryce of the university of Dundee, are correct? If he could give those undertakings, he would greatly assist some of us.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): Now we have it: after all the to-ing and fro-ing, and after all the kerfuffle outside this place, all that we are being offered is an independent review of a situation that should have been resolved by any Government who were semi-competent. Will the Minister explain how independent the review will be, who will be on the review body, and how will it prevent uncertainty among the student population? From what I have heard, all this is simply a ploy based not on any principle, but on ducking and weaving by a Government who have been trapped by their inability to sort out discrimination that they have created.

This is a point of principle. Tuition fees are wrong and, along with student loans, they will restrict access to higher education. The Government are completely out of step with university principals, students, the Association of University Teachers and others involved in education. The Scottish National party has opposed all attempts to erode the principle of education for all, according to ability and regardless of financial circumstances. Tuition fees are, like student loans, a backward step. As the Government insist on those fees, we can only seek to ensure that the arrangements are as fair as possible.

Mr. Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that his party's commitment to use the Scottish Parliament to remove student tuition fees and student loans has been wiped from the internet, along with the rest of his party's previous policies?

Mr. Welsh: The Minister has forgotten all points of principle. His Government should have allowed the Scottish Parliament to take this decision. In respect of the Scottish Parliament, we will get rid of this discriminatory anomaly affecting English, Welsh and Northern Irish students. We shall maintain our moral commitment, unlike the Government.

The amount involved is only £2 million. It is a disgrace if the three Departments cannot find £2 million from their budgets. The Scottish National party will, on a point of principle, ensure that we get rid of this discrimination against English, Welsh and Northern Irish students.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Can I be absolutely sure that the hon. Gentleman is committing the Scottish National party to spending Scottish taxpayers' money to fund English students coming to Scottish universities. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Welsh: Who is the nationalist now, I wonder.

11 pm

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you ask hon. Members to apologise? We do not use the word "racist" in the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I did not hear that word being used.

Mr. Welsh: The question of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) should be directed to the Government, who have introduced this measure that discriminates against English, Welsh and Northern Irish students. The Scottish National party will ensure that such discrimination does not exist.

I refer the hon. Lady to a debate on this issue that I secured last January. We made our views clear that we are against such discrimination. The Home Departments in Wales, Northern Ireland and England should pick up the tab. The Government are annoyed at the House of Lords' refusal to back down. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment is becoming increasingly alarmed that his whole Bill will collapse. My party believes that it would be no bad thing if it did collapse, because we think that all matters relating to higher education in Scotland should be within the remit of the Scottish Parliament. It will not be long before the Scottish Parliament is in power and taking these decisions. It should be left to that Parliament to decide, in a Scottish context, what the Scottish people want to happen in our universities.

If the Government are determined that the Teaching and Higher Education Bill should become law, all they need to do is to accept the amendment and they would have the approval of those involved in education, and of the general public.

In January, I led an Adjournment debate on this issue. I raised objections to the Government's policy, not just because it is discriminatory, but because of the effects that it will have on Scottish universities and on the Scottish economy. I was accused of scaremongering, yet my fears are shared by many involved in education in Scotland.

The principal of Dundee university said at this year's graduation ceremony last Thursday:

> "It is the end of an era for higher education. . . . I cannot disguise my feelings of profound concern. Notwithstanding what you may read in the press, our application figures leave little doubt that the issue of student fees is having an adverse effect, particularly the differential between Scottish domiciled students and those from England, Wales and Northern Ireland."

Even before the review, the Government have been told what is going on. The principal went on:

> "Whatever rationalisations are put forward, the practical impact is discriminatory. If this leads to a decrease in the diversity of the student body . . . then it will be Scottish higher education and ultimately Scottish interests which will be the losers."

The Government do not need a review to find out what educationists of Scotland are telling them now.

In an independent Scotland, the Scottish National party plans to abolish tuition fees. If the Government fail to listen to public opinion and to solve this anomaly, a SNP-led Scottish Parliament, even at a reduced devolutionary level, will find the £2 million required to ensure equity for all students who choose to study in

[Mr. Welsh]

Scotland. That compares well with the Government's prevarication by offering a review rather than solving the problem.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): My information is that 31 per cent. of the students from England who will be eligible to pay these fees will come from English public schools. As a former pupil of an English public school, I find it odd that the Scottish National party proposes to raise Scottish taxpayers' money to subsidise people from English public schools.

Mr. Welsh: The hon. Gentleman has been in the Labour party for too long. He has forgotten what principle means. If he is willing to sell his political soul to new Labour, good luck to him, but others have different views.

Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that, by that reckoning, 70 per cent. do not come from English public schools. We would sort the anomaly out, but his question should be directed at the person who—

Mr. Home Robertson *rose—*

Mr. Welsh: Will the hon. Gentleman sit down? We have heard enough from him.

Mr. Wilson *rose—*

Mr. Welsh: The hon. Gentleman's question should be directed at the hon. Member who is now trying to intervene, and who failed to convince his English, Welsh and Northern Ireland colleagues of the need to sort out the discrimination. The hon. Gentleman should direct his ire at his own Front Benchers, who could solve the problem very quickly and at very little cost.

Mr. Wilson: I think that—doubtless inadvertently—the hon. Gentleman misunderstood the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson). At least a third of students coming from England, Northern Ireland or Wales to Scotland will pay no tuition fees. My hon. Friend's point was that, as a third of students coming from England to Scottish universities come from the private sector—and are welcome to do so—inevitably the vast majority of those who would benefit from the waiving of fees would be people who had paid for a private-school education in England. The hon. Gentleman intends to give them—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The intervention is far too long.

Mr. Welsh: I wanted the Minister to explain his hon. Friend's question, because I am a bit fed up with the Minister fiddling statistics and trying to make a case when none exists. He stated categorically that 40 per cent. of students would not pay tuition fees, but that is not necessarily the case. If the worst comes to the worst, and people from low-income households are deterred from coming to university—as we fear—the figure will not be 40 per cent.; it could be 30 per cent., 20 per cent. or lower. The Minister has used statistical methods and debating tricks to hide a policy that is fundamentally flawed and basically immoral.

I was going to say that the Government must tonight listen to the views expressed, not only in another place, but by hon. Members on both sides of the House—those who have not have been gagged on the Minister's side, that is. They must also listen to the voices of students and those working in education. The Government's policy is opposed by Scottish Ancients, the Association of University Teachers, the National Union of Students and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom—but, of course, this Labour Government think that they know better. If they are so confident of the wisdom of what they are doing, why do they not allow a free vote?

The fact is that, yet again, the House of Lords has given the Government a chance to get out of the corner into which they have painted themselves. They are totally out of step with educational and public opinion on the subject, and they will pay a price for that. It will be unfortunate for everyone if the Scottish education system also pays a price for their incompetence.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of an independent review as a step in the right direction and a recognition by the Government that, on this important issue, they may be wrong; but I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, or whoever will wind up the debate, to give us assurances along the lines requested by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). The Government's announcement seems to be a last-minute concession: I certainly knew nothing about it before the debate, and I think that it has taken many of us by surprise. I feel that we are entitled to know more about the details of the membership of the body conducting the review, and about its remit and time scale. Nevertheless, I welcome the fact that the Government have acted, and the fact that the debate was opened by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

During the previous debate, I remarked to my hon. Friend the Minister for Education and Industry at the Scottish Office that he had perhaps drawn the short straw in coming to the Dispatch Box and trying to defend the indefensible. Of course this matter is of great relevance to the Scottish Office, which has some responsibility for Scottish universities and Scottish higher education in general, but, because it affects students attending Scottish universities from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, greater interest should be—and should have been from the outset—shown in this matter by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and, indeed, by the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Northern Ireland.

I do not want to go over the same old ground that we have gone over in previous debates, but I should like to comment on some of the points that have been put forward by the Government, both in the House and in some of their press statements. We are told that better-off students would be the main beneficiaries of the fee waiver. If that is true, it would also be true in the case of the Scottish Office's original decision regarding a fee waiver for students from Scotland and other European Union countries.

I suppose that there are some well-off students from England who attend Scottish universities, but there are some well off students from Scotland and indeed from France, Germany and Italy who attend Scottish universities. The latter will nevertheless benefit from the

fee waiver, whereas their English counterparts with the same parental income will not. That is where the injustice comes in.

Besides, it is nonsense to suggest that students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland who go to Scottish universities generally come from very high-income families. The Government's own figures refute that, because we are talking about 3,500 people a year and, if they all came from very high-income families, obviously, they would all pay the full fees of £1,000 and the total cost of the amendment would be £3.5 million, but the Government have at last admitted that the total cost of the amendment would be only £2 million. Therefore, the average fee paid by the 3,500 students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland works out at about £570 and the corresponding average residual parental income is £22,750 per annum, which is not exactly filthy rich.

During the previous debate, the Minister for Education and Industry said—this has caused a bit of controversy in Scotland:

> "The pecking order of schools supplying students from England to Edinburgh and St. Andrews universities is: No. 1, Eton college; No. 2, Wellington college; No. 3, Charterhouse; and, No. 4, Westminster school. That tells us something about the wonderful, egalitarian education system that we have in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 1 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 442.]

What he did not tell us was that he was referring to a grand total of 256 students, out of a total of 8,400 students, from England attending Edinburgh or St. Andrews universities, which are not typical Scottish universities. Nevertheless, we are talking about a sample—and not exactly a random sample—of 256 students out of a total of 8,400.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has done any more research. I believe that most of those 256 probably come from Scottish families and go to English public schools, and will get the concession because their parents live in Scotland.

Mr. Canavan: That may be the case. The statement that those 256 are absolutely domiciled in England may be inaccurate.

The broader picture—of students from England accepted to all Scottish universities last year—shows that the breakdown is far more egalitarian than was suggested by my hon. Friend the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office. Of those students, 33 per cent. came from state schools, including 26 per cent. from comprehensives; 21 per cent. came from further education, many—probably most—of whom would have come indirectly from state schools; 1 per cent. from higher education; 13 per cent. from other or unknown sources; and 32 per cent. from independent schools. It is therefore nonsense to claim that the majority of English entrants to Scottish universities are from English public schools.

11.15 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the principal issues that is being missed in the debate is that the Scottish higher education system needs students from all walks of life and from all countries to provide the diversity and specialness that make Scottish universities so vibrant and positive? Does he agree that the Government's proposals will drive away the very students who give the Scottish education system its very special flavour?

Mr. Canavan: Scottish universities—possibly more than many of their English counterparts—have always had an international outlook. It would be a tragedy if they became narrow-minded nationalist institutions rather than international institutions.

The trend to which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) referred has already started. This year, compared with last year, applications from England are down 4.1 per cent., and applications from Northern Ireland are down 5.5 per cent. If the trend continues, it will pose a threat to the viability of many four-year honours courses and to the Scottish tradition of a broad-based university education following on from a broad-based school education.

The other point that I should like to mention was repeated in this debate by the Secretary of State—the Government's claim that acceptance of the Lords amendment would create a new anomaly, as students doing a four-year course in England, Wales or Northern Ireland would not qualify for a fee waiver for their final year. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge)—who intervened earlier in the debate—is not in the Chamber now, as I seem to recall that there was a vote to eradicate that specific anomaly, and that she, most of my hon. Friends and every Minister voted against eradicating it. I should welcome any proposal to extend the fee waiver to such students. However, the Government rejected such a proposal because of its cost, reckoning that £27 million would be too expensive.

There is also a uniqueness about the Scottish anomaly. Under the Government's proposals, a student at a Scottish university may have to pay £1,000 more than a student in the same class doing the same course at the same university and with the same parental income, simply because he or she comes from a different part of the United Kingdom. That situation will arise not at any university or college in England, Wales or Northern Ireland but only in Scotland. It would cost only £2 million to eradicate that unique and unfair anomaly.

The Government have probably already incurred a six-figure sum in debating the matter continually here and in another place. If the measure is challenged in the courts, as it is likely to be, they will face paying a bigger sum out of public expenditure in legal fees. I am pleased that, at this eleventh hour, the Government are prepared to think again.

Finally, I have one comment on my right hon. Friend's rant about the House of Lords, that we also heard during the previous debate on the matter. It would be a sad day for British democracy if even the reactionary, unelected House of Lords were seen to take a more enlightened view than a Labour Government—especially a Labour Government who were elected on the mantra and the priorities of education, education, education.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am absolutely delighted to follow the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) who conducted a forensic examination of the Government's position. He effectively pointed out that the Government have not been consistent on the issue. If my

[Mr. Don Foster]

hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he will pick up that point.

The House well knows that the Liberal Democrats are opposed to the main plank of the Bill—the introduction of tuition fees—and we voted against it on Third Reading. We have argued consistently that the Bill was hastily prepared without any real attention to detail, as the fiasco over gap year students clearly demonstrated.

We are discussing another example of the effects of legislation that has been prepared too hastily—the Scottish anomaly. Already we have heard from the hon. Members for Havant (Mr. Willetts), for Angus (Mr. Welsh) and for Falkirk, West—and the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) certainly implied it—that the Government have now created a ludicrous, incoherent and unjust position. Surely it cannot be acceptable to right hon. and hon. Members that students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland should pay more than students from Scotland for the same course at the same university. That is the anomaly that we are debating.

Sadly, the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) simply fails to understand the difference between that anomaly and the fact that students from the same area may choose to go to different universities in different locations, study different courses and possibly pay different fees. That is not an anomaly of the same order.

Equally, it cannot be right that students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland should pay more than students from all other European Union countries. Why should a student from Cumbria in England pay more than a student from Umbria in Italy? Why should a student from Manchester pay more than a student from Madrid? The Secretary of State should be aware that many others agree that that is ludicrous.

Lord Shore of Stepney, a former Labour Cabinet Minister described the position as

"folly beyond all belief. It is not just discrimination; it is reverse discrimination."

Another Labour peer, Lord Stoddart, remarked in the same debate:

"Ordinary working folk, the people in factories and offices, will not understand why English, Welsh and Northern Ireland students have to pay £4,000 for a course in Scotland, while Italians, Southern Irish and Scots have to pay only £3,000. They will laugh their sides off. They will ask 'What sort of people can do this? Who is advising them? Why do they take the advice they are receiving if that sort of nonsense is being handed out to them?'"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 July 1998; Vol. 591, c. 1103-05.]

No wonder Lord Stoddart went on to describe the Government's position as nonsense and an absurdity.

Dr. George Turner *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I happily give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman deal with what I think is an important point on whether there is an issue worthy of debate? Lord Dearing was appointed by the Conservative Government to head the commission whose recommendations this Government are applying. Will the hon. Gentleman explain why Lord Dearing still supports his commission's recommendation if, as the hon. Member says, there is no academic or reasonable argument for it?

Mr. Foster: It is a great pity to hear the hon. Gentleman make the same mistake as the Prime Minister has been making day after day at the Dispatch Box. His argument would be infinitely more credible if the Government had accepted the Dearing recommendations, but they have not.

There is no question but that the Government's position is nonsense and an absurdity. One would have thought that they would be grateful to my right hon. Friend Lord Steel, who tabled in another place an amendment that did not seek to wreck the Bill, or even to tear down the arrangements for tuition fees, much as we would like to; it merely sought to get the Government off the hook—to allow them to avoid any further embarrassment—by ending the Scottish anomaly.

I hope that the Secretary of State has carefully examined the vote in another place, as the amendment made clear the feeling about this issue—it commanded an almost unprecedented majority of 211. The majority was so large that, if all Conservative peers had abstained, the amendment would still have won the day. It was so large that, if all hereditary peers had stayed at home, the amendment would still have been agreed to. The amendment's supporters included a former Master of the Rolls, a former Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, a former vice-chancellor of London university, the president of the British Academy, three bishops, a former Clerk of the Parliaments and a former Speaker of the House of Commons. Those people are not negligible; when they and so many others are joined by senior Labour peers, their voices surely cannot be ignored.

The Government rightly want to reform the House of Lords, and we support them in that. Like us, however, they still want a second, revising chamber. The House of Commons must accept that, from time to time, the revising chamber will want to revise, which is what legitimately happened on this occasion in another place. An unacceptable anomaly was identified, and a proposal to rectify it was agreed.

The Government's reaction was remarkable. On 8 July, Glasgow's *The Herald* said:

"Senior Government sources last night made clear their determination to ensure the heavily-criticised plan does eventually become law. 'We are taking the Drumcree line on this; no surrender to the peers. We are toughing it out,' said one source."

[Interruption.] The Secretary of State may ask, "Who said that?" He should check with *The Herald*, from which it is a direct quotation.

Toughing it out will perpetuate the ludicrous anomaly that is perhaps most starkly illustrated in today's *Daily Telegraph*. The article tells us that Tom Laycock from Lamberton, 100 yards north of the Scottish border, will pay £1,000 less than Tom Maxwell, from Berwick-upon-Tweed, two miles south of the border, when they both attend an English, film and media course at Stirling university this year.

Last week, the Prime Minister made clear his determination to tough it out. He seems to have misunderstood even the Government's position. He frequently tells us that the Bill reflects the Dearing

proposals, when it does not, and at Prime Minister's Questions last Wednesday he got it wrong again. He initially implied that the cost of Lord Steel's amendment would be £27 million. Even had free tuition to all students in their fourth year been proposed in the amendment, which it was not, the figure would have been wrong: definitive calculations by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals over the weekend show that even then the figure be only £18 million. In fact, the amendment, which would remedy the incoherent and unjust position, would cost only £2 million.

11.30 pm

The approach of some of the Secretary of State's colleagues can only be described as pig-headed, so perhaps we should applaud his attempt to find a compromise. At least he has shown some signs of realising the hopelessness of the Government's position and appears to be willing to try to build a consensus; but he has not gone nearly far enough to elicit my support or that of my party.

We have become somewhat immune to the offer of a review. After only 14 months of this Government, we are approaching 150 reviews and task forces: that is 10 reviews a month. It is as if the Secretary of State is saying, "Ah, yes. I might be beginning to understand, and perhaps you're right, but I'm not prepared to change my position, so I'll stick to it, but if it causes a problem, I'll review the situation."

We believe that the anomaly will create problems. More importantly, the so-called Scottish anomaly is unjust. In the face of injustice and inequality, we will seek every means at our disposal to persuade the Secretary of State to do what anyone should do if he finds that he is wrong: change his mind. He has shown some willingness to consider that he might be wrong. I hope that he will go further. We are prepared to enter discussions with him to help him to dig himself out of the hole that, frankly, others have dug for him. Better still, he could resolve the matter here and now for £2 million by simply accepting the Lords amendment.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): People outside cannot understand the preoccupation of the House with a minority of higher education students from the most well-off families. When people ask me what is going on, when the House of Lords has for the third time brought back this detail of the Bill, and I talk to them about higher education, they begin to understand. Let me try to explain to the House, as I have to those people.

As a country, we say to students that it will take them, on average, five years to get a first degree. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, for the most part, two years are spent at school and three at university. In Scotland, for the most part, one year is spent at school and three at university. [HON. MEMBERS: "Not true."] Fine. That is exactly what I have been learning: more students now stay on for two years at school and then have three at university. The Bill's generosity towards Scotland should therefore be accepted and understood. We are saying that there are five years in which to gain a degree. That argument has been accepted for all students. The special situation in Scotland of having four-year degrees is being recognised and funded.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Valerie Davey: No, it is my turn.

The Bill is fairer to more students than any of the amendments put forward in the other place.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I do not want to comment on the remarks of the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) because I do not believe that she knows what she is talking about.

I speak not as a former Secretary of State for Education, but as someone born, brought up and educated in Scotland. I did a four-year university degree course in Scotland as well, incidentally, as a degree course in England.

I want to address the two arguments put forward by the Secretary of State. I have followed all the arguments about Cumbria and Umbria, and so on. Relevant though they are, I do not want to comment on them. I certainly will not follow the prejudice shown by the Minister of State in previous debates and again tonight. He should be ashamed to resort to arguments about students from English independent schools, which is base, old Labour prejudice.

The Secretary of State rested his case on two arguments. The first is that the Scottish education system is different. Because students do highers, they tend to spend less time in school, and need longer at university. That argument does not wash. Some students from Scotland—I was one—do A-levels before entering the Scottish higher education system.

In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said, the Secretary of State cannot argue that his policy on Scottish tuition fees rests on the nature of Scottish education when he is allowing students from all other European Union countries, which have completely different educational systems, to benefit from free tuition. He cannot dismiss that argument by saying that it affects only 350 students. It is an argument of principle, not of numbers.

The Government have not implemented the Dearing report, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) pointed out, left the matter to the Secretary of State for Scotland. They have instead decided to follow their own route because the four-year honours degree is the norm in Scotland, but does not apply elsewhere. The Secretary of State's first argument fails on that ground.

The right hon. Gentleman's second argument was that, if students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland who went to Scotland were to be allowed free tuition in the fourth year, the same would have to apply to four-year courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Again, that argument does not wash. It is totally bogus. The point is that we want to treat all students at the same university equally, wherever they come from within the European Union. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was right to say that the ability of students from the United Kingdom to go to whatever university they want is part of the cement of our universal university education system.

If students from Scotland decide to do a four-year degree course at an English university, they must accept that they will not get a year's free tuition, because that

[Mr. John MacGregor]

will not apply to anyone from England. All we argue is that students from anywhere in the EU who go to a Scottish university should be treated the same as students from Scotland. Equally, the answer to the point made by the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge)—she is not here—is that everyone who goes to an English university, whether from Scotland or anywhere else, knows that the fourth year of tuition will not be free. That is the simple point. Therefore, the £2 million argument is correct and the £27 million is a complete red herring. That is why the Secretary of State was wrong in his arguments tonight.

Mr. Willis: Like everyone else who has mentioned her, I am also sorry that the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) is not in her place.

The Bill has been a disaster for the Government from the very beginning, and the Scottish question has gone from bad to worse. Every time that the issue has ping-ponged like Wimbledon in ermine between this and the other place, the Government's justifications of their position have become more bizarre. If it were such an important issue, the Secretary of State would have mentioned it on 25 June 1997 when he responded to the Dearing inquiry. However, he did not consider the consequences for Scottish four-year degrees at that time.

Fortunately, the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, was on hand to help out the Secretary of State. The Minister announced that there would be a concession for Scottish students who were domiciled in Scotland and that their fourth-year fees would be paid. It was then pointed out that that was not good enough because the concession fell foul of European law and the fees of all European students would have to be paid. So that concession was made.

We then had the marvellous situation on a Radio 4 programme when the Minister justified the fact that French students at Scottish universities would have their fees paid, by saying that they were part of the European Union—of course, the fees of students from England, Northern Ireland or Wales would not be paid because they were part of the European Union. Since then, the Minister has proved singularly unable to persuade his colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment to fund those students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland who attend Scottish universities. Ultimately, the debate is about one Minister going off on his own. Ever since then, the Government have made a concerted effort to cover their tracks and not give ground. Even on this very small point, the Government are not prepared to give way, irrespective of the arguments.

Lord Sewel—who has done a remarkable job attempting to defend the Government's position in another place—explained that, because there was a difference between the two systems, the rules had to be different. He then admitted that there would be a small anomaly and added that, as students would be paying more for their maintenance, an extra £1,000 did not matter. That became the basis of the Government's argument. When that did not work, an attack was launched on the Scottish university system. There was a concerted effort to persuade us that it was far better for students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland to enter university at year two because they were well equipped to do so.

Mr. Hayes: Am I right in remembering—perhaps the hon. Gentleman can correct me—that the Minister described that Scottish tradition as bogus, thereby insulting Scottish universities and causing real distress among vice-chancellors, students and all those who believe that it is a decent and proper Scottish tradition?

Mr. Willis: I do not know whether I am grateful for that intervention.[HON. MEMBERS: "You are."] I am told that I am—but one cannot toady to the Tories. It was not a member of the other place, but the Minister who made that disgraceful statement to which I shall return later.

When the Bill was on Report in the House of Lords, the arguments changed again. Then it was not because the university systems were different, but because there was a difference in intellectual attainment between students in Scotland and England. We then went on to the hidden agenda when the Minister in the Lords said that Scottish universities wanted English students because they wanted extra cash.

The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) was right to say that the Minister for Education and Industry argued that the Scottish four-year degree system was bogus and that the act should be disregarded. Tonight, we have had the final throw of the dice. The Secretary of State said that all those arguments mean nothing and that this is really a battle with the House of Lords. He said that, irrespective of the argument, this House must win. That is what we are faced with. We are to ignore the arguments and the issue's importance, and ensure that the Secretary of State and his macho Government win.

11.45 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): About once a fortnight, the House assembles to hear the Government marshall their arguments for this policy. Every time, their arguments become weaker, less plausible and more desperate. Tonight, we have seen the start of the Government's retreat.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) said that it came as a surprise to him that the Minister was offering this half concession. It came as no surprise to me because, characteristically, a journalist had phoned me some hours ago saying that the Secretary of State would offer it and asking what our response would be. As ever, it had been leaked to the press hours before it came to the House.

We should pay tribute to hon. Members in the other place for their commendable insistence and for producing a reasonable and narrow amendment, which the Government would accept if they had any sense. I urge their Lordships to keep going until the Government's U-turn tonight becomes the headlong retreat that this policy deserves.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), a former Secretary of State for Education, honoured the Secretary of State by saying that he had two arguments. I suggest that basically he had one—that two anomalies are possible and that the Government are choosing the easier of them.

That argument does not bear the faintest examination. If one accepts, as the Government do, that the Scottish and English education systems are different, one could accept that the fee structure should be different. If one does not accept that, as the Government appear not to, two students doing identical courses will pay different fees. That is unfair, and if the Government do not recognise it, they are being wilfully ignorant and deliberately pig-headed.

Let us be generous to the Secretary of State. If there are two anomalies, which is the easiest to swallow? The Lords amendment would introduce fairness to Scottish university courses at a cost of £2 million. That is slightly more than three times the cost of the Lord Chancellor's wallpaper. We could pay for it out of the extra budget allocated to political advisers and spin doctors by the Government. We are told that the Scottish Office already has the £2 million in its estimates. Only the arrogance of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment stands between the Government and a welcome outbreak of common sense on this policy. *[Interruption.]* He has blustered away, and continues to do so from a sedentary position. I invite him to consider the effect that he has had on his colleagues in the other place.

We have already heard some of what Lord Shore of Stepney said, but it is worth repeating to the House another of his remarks. He said that his colleagues in the other place,

"if they were allowed a free vote on the issue . . . would make quite clear their own feeling of repugnance at what is being proposed."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 July 1998; Vol. 591, c. 1103.]

He emphasised the word "repugnance" and he was right to do so. I hope that, this evening, there are once again some men and women of principle on the Government Benches who are prepared to vote according to their conscience.

The Secretary of State has not convinced Britain's students either. Tonight, I am happy to give a plug for *The Guardian*, which tomorrow will feature a full-page advertisement asking the crucial question:

"Why should it cost £1,000 more to go to university in Scotland?"

The advertisement has been placed by the National Union of Students, whose representatives tell me that a ring round enabled them to raise, in one afternoon and in voluntary contributions from member unions, the money to pay for the advertisement, such is the strength of feeling against the Government's policy in universities throughout the country. The NUS makes the key points:

"We know it doesn't make sense. The House of Lords knows it doesn't make sense. Is it so hard to admit a simple error?"

It is clearly too hard for the Labour Government and for the Secretary of State.

The NUS addresses itself directly to the Prime Minister, asking:

"Please Prime Minister, listen to the pleas of students, lecturers, senior academics and the House of Lords. It's time to stop the destruction of Scottish universities and to stop your legislation as it stands. This Bill has caused confusion and uncertainty for all new students. It's time to think again."

I hope that, for once, Education Ministers will listen to those most involved in the process of education—the students who are going through it.

What arguments we have heard from those few Labour Back Benchers whom the Government have managed to get on their feet tonight have been straightforward, old-fashioned class warfare, in which vein they have been encouraged by the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson). In a recent article for *The Scotsman*, he wrote:

"the most conspicuous beneficiaries of the concession demanded by the Lords would be the products of private education outside Scotland who opted to pursue the four-year Scottish honours degree."

In new Labour, class warfare is the last refuge of the scoundrel. If they have nothing else left, they revert to their atavistic instincts.

In this case, to do so is not only cheap, but inappropriate. First, if the Minister has great objections to gilded youth from English public schools, what about gilded youth from Scottish public schools? For some reason, Fettes springs to mind. Secondly, and more to the point, what about the many students from Northern Ireland who choose to pursue higher education in Scotland? The president of the NUS in Scotland says that he has been

"inundated with telephone calls from anxious students from Northern Ireland who wished to know if they could escape the £1,000 fee by gaining Scottish residency . . . Of 40 or so students we met, not one was from a 'privileged elite'. None were well able to afford fees, none were confident of missing out the first year of the four year degree, and most did not have that option."

That is what the students from Northern Ireland are saying. The Government's attack on them as a privileged elite is completely inappropriate.

Let us look at the real figures relating to the students about whom the Minister talks. I shall quote from another article by the Minister—I have been assiduous above and beyond the call of duty in reading all the Minister's words—in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*. He wrote:

"Any student from a family with an income of below £16,500 will not pay any fees in any year if they come to Scotland."

The Minister might regard a £16,500 family income as enormous or as signifying fat cats, but I should point out that that is only just over £8,000 per parent. Are such people really fat cats? Are they worthy of the sneers of the Minister and those sitting behind him, desperate to do the Whips' bidding? No, they are exactly the people whom we should be encouraging into higher education, many of whom are the first from their families.

I agree that the Minister has made his case worse than he needed to, because the Government's own figures state that, if a student's gross family income is less than about £23,000 a year, the students and the student's family will not have to pay anything towards fees. The Government seem to regard any family on more than £11,500 per year per parent as a fat-cat family that does not deserve any help to get into higher education. That attitude is completely disgraceful.

Then there is the legal case. How much do the Government expect to pay in legal fees when the decision is challenged? It certainly will be challenged. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) mentioned advice from Edinburgh university. He will know that there is advice from many distinguished lawyers from Scotland and elsewhere that the European convention on human rights will leave the Government wide open to challenge. Quite apart from the wider issue of equity, they should not waste the education budget in this way.

The one interesting point that the Secretary of State made was that, in all cases, this House must prevail. That is the true arrogance of power. No revising Chamber in

[Mr. Damian Green]

any circumstance will be listened to by this Government, not even when, as in this case, it is supported by students, vice-chancellors, the Scottish universities, legal experts and every Opposition party. Not one Labour Back Bencher who is keenly involved in this issue has made any plausible case in favour of the policy. Where are the former presidents of the NUS when students need them?

The Secretary of State has tonight started the long retreat, but his offer of a review is completely inadequate. Why does he not offer Labour Members a free vote on this issue? That would be a proper concession. If he does not, we shall know that it is only the payroll vote, the ambitious-for-a-job vote and the Whips' lackeys' vote that are pushing through this absurd policy. We have won the intellectual argument and we have won the moral argument. I urge hon. Members on all sides to go into the Lobby against this miserable policy and save the Government from themselves.

Mr. Wilson: Perhaps I can help the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) with his intellectual argument because he obviously has difficulty distinguishing between £16,000 and £23,000. I shall help him because I know that he is anxious to secure the intellectual basis of his argument. One figure is net and the other is gross. I appreciate that those are difficult concepts.

Mr. Green: The Minister rightly says that £23,000 is the gross figure, and in doing so he is admitting that families with a gross income above that figure are the fat cats at whom he has sneered throughout the debate. Many families in Britain will find that interesting.

Mr. Wilson: I am sorry, but I shall have to help the hon. Gentleman again, because he intervened too quickly. I was about to point out that anyone with that minimum financial level for contributions would contribute not £1,000, as the hon. Gentleman implies, but £50. If even in all the dishonesty and bogus—I use the word advisedly—indignation of this debate, Opposition Members are suggesting that any student from the rest of the United Kingdom who has decided to follow a four-year course in Scotland would be deterred from doing so by the prospect of paying £50 over four years, the synthetic nature of their indignation becomes even more apparent.

I was very pleased to hear the hon. Member for Ashford welcoming, and singing a paean of praise to, the advertisement by the National Union of Students in *The Guardian* tomorrow. He will of course be aware that, under Tory higher education legislation, that advertisement would not have appeared because it would have been illegal. Perhaps the House can unite tonight at least in celebrating the freedom of speech granted by the Government against the will of the Tories.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): While the Minister is on the issue of the law, would he be good enough to answer the question put to him by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)? It is the Government's policy that, in the next Session of Parliament, after the Human Rights Bill has been enacted, the Minister responsible for a Bill will make declarations as to its compatibility with the European convention on human rights. Has the Minister or the Secretary of State taken advice on that? In the Minister's opinion, is the proposal compatible with the convention?

Mr. Wilson: One of the endearing features of our mutual friend, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), is that he asks the same questions at each succeeding debate, even though he was given the answer at the previous one. The answer at the previous debate is the same as the answer at this debate: yes, of course the Government have taken advice, and the very firm advice is that what takes place within the jurisdiction is not a matter for the European courts, which are intent on achieving equity between member states. I find it extraordinary that the Liberal Democrats, of all people, and other pro-Europeans who preach the doctrine of subsidiarity and devolution, have such difficulty when it comes to practising subsidiarity and devolution.

One of the remarkable statements tonight came from the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who gave a constituency example, the hon. Gentleman leaped to his feet and said, "But there are two different systems in Scotland and in England." That was a belated flash of enlightenment. This whole issue is about matching within one state two distinct systems—the Scottish and English education systems.

Tory Members are all, by definition, from English constituencies. There are none from Scotland or Wales.

Mr. Ian Bruce: That is outrageous.

12 midnight

Mr. Wilson: It might be outrageous, but it is true. If it is outrageous—

Mr. Bruce: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that the usual channels have asked three colleagues to sit down to give that hon. Gentleman time to slander us?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Wilson: If the hon. Gentleman will tell me later how I slandered him, I shall try to develop the theme.

All the Tory Members who have spoken represent English constituents, yet none them has spoken up for his or her own constituents. I hope that their constituents have noted that. The irony is that, a fortnight ago, Tory Members were here speaking and voting in support of a diametrically different Lords' amendment, which would have given that concession not only to students from England attending Scottish universities, but to students from England doing four-year degree courses at all universities within the United Kingdom.

The plot has now changed completely. The Tories now say that English students attending English universities do not matter at all; the only ones who matter are those attending Scottish universities. We know that, on average, all the Tory Members who have spoken have 10 times

more constituents attending English universities on four-year degree courses than Scottish universities, so why do not they speak for their constituents?

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Wilson: I shall give way to my hon. Friend in due course, not when Tory Members tell me to give way to him.

Thus, we have a remarkable discovery from the hon. Member for Havant that there are two different systems.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: We then had an equally remarkable statement from—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It would help considerably if the Minister would say whether he intends to give way when people seek to intervene.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to mislead the House by confusing Master of Arts four-year degrees in England with Bachelor of Arts four-year degrees in Scotland?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That, I think, is a matter for debate.

Mr. Wilson: I do not think it was much a point of order as a point of ignorance.

The second notable statement tonight was made by the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh). He gave us a real, live spending commitment on behalf of the Scottish National party. Those of us who follow the Scottish press know that, within the past week, it has been revealed that every previous spending commitment by the SNP has been wiped from its internet site, because it has realised that someone might start adding them up. Now a new internet site is being opened, and the hon. Member for Angus has made the first spending commitment.

Does the hon. Member for Angus, or any Opposition Member, know how much of the Scottish block goes towards subsidising, supporting, the presence of students from other parts of the United Kingdom at Scottish universities—something to which I have no objection? Does the hon. Gentleman know how much it is? Let me tell him. I assume that he has no idea that the net figure from the Scottish Office block spent on supporting students in the rest of the United Kingdom at Scottish universities is £65 million. That is not enough for the hon. Gentleman, so tonight the first spending commitment by the SNP is to commit it to spending, not £65 million, but £67 million, on supporting students from the rest of the UK at Scottish universities.

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Wilson: In due course.

The third remarkable statement tonight was made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Stirling.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Falkirk, West.

Mr. Wilson: I thought that I would never hear my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) say, to support his argument, that "only 32 per cent." of students coming from England and the rest of the UK to Scotland come from independent schools. I believe that 32 per cent. is quite a high percentage. I would not mind—I say this to my hon. Friend in good spirit—if that figure, in my view a remarkable one, were a little lower. If there were a few more students from Bannockburn high school or St. Modan's academy, I would not regard that as the end of the world. However, that is a matter of judgment for my hon. Friend.

Perhaps most remarkable—

Mr. Wallace: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Wilson: No.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, we heard the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), pray in aid Lord Shore of Stepney in support of his argument—Lord Shore of Stepney, who finds a passing anti-European bandwagon, jumps aboard it and then finds, extraordinarily, that his views are being quoted with approval by the hon. Member for Bath.

Mr. Dalyell: Lord Shore of Stepney was my good colleague for more than 30 years.

Returning to the constructive suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, may I ask what is the time scale for the review, and what are the terms of reference? If there is a test case, as undoubtedly there will be, might we wait until we have the result of the test case in law before any action is taken?

Mr. Wilson: I need hardly say that we intended answering, because my hon. Friend had already asked those questions, so of course I intended answering him. Let me turn to the subject of the proposed review. Let us be clear about this: the Government have always said that they would monitor the effects of the changes that are proposed—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Hang on. We are very pleased—from a position of strength and from confidence in our views, we are very pleased—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Behind you.

Mr. Wilson: We are very pleased—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard. There are far too many interventions, particularly from a sedentary position.

Mr. Wilson: Everyone knows the source of the Opposition's behaviour. I suppose that is all they have to console them.

The review will be formal and independently chaired. It will take place in the early part of next year, in time for the following academic year, so that the arguments that

[Mr. Wilson]

have been adduced on both sides of the House and in the other place over several weeks can be assessed and their impact on applications considered.

If we are wrong, we shall accept that. We do not believe that we are wrong, and I do not sense one iota of such humility on the part of the Opposition. We believe that we are right, but, if matters are in doubt, we have a committee. The Scottish university principals, with whom I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow is closely connected, will be represented on it, as will the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals. It will have independent chairmanship at its head.

If the findings were that what we were doing had any of the effects claimed by the Opposition—something that we refute—we shall learn from that and act on it. That is an act of generosity and magnanimity on the Government's part, which I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow will support.

On the question of legal challenge, it depends on the nature of such a challenge and the stage at which it was made. As I have repeatedly told my hon. Friend, the advice that we have received is that that challenge would not be successful.

Mr. Wallace: When the Minister answered my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), he said that the legal advice that he had received was that the European rules did not apply to an internal arrangement within a member state, and that he was satisfied that the European Court of Justice would accept that.

However, as the Minister well knows, the purpose of the Human Rights Bill, which is before the House, is to incorporate the European convention on human rights into domestic law. Therefore, those matters will be justiciable in the British courts. What legal advice has he received with regard to any possible challenge under the European convention on human rights that would be heard before a British court?

Mr. Wilson: The advice is the same. There is no breach of human rights. I understand why Opposition Members and some in the House of Lords have tried to elevate the matter and make it something that it is not. A practical problem arises from the fact that, in the United Kingdom, there are two different educational systems with different school qualifications and honours degree courses of different lengths. That is what Lord Dearing's committee recommended and Sir Ron Garrick acknowledged. The recommendation was that we should take exactly the steps that we have taken. To try to leap from that to breaches of human rights is ridiculous. On that basis—

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have a genuine dilemma. Advice to Ministers is usually kept confidential. The advice of Law Officers to Ministers that what they are doing does not contradict the European convention is not advice that the House can normally obtain. In the present circumstances, the Government intend to incorporate the European law. Although the Minister said that it would be a purely domestic matter, it is accepted on both sides of the House and by Ministers that European students from outside the UK would be treated differently from many students in this country. *[Interruption.]* If I may continue my point of order—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is simply seeking to extend the debate. The point that he is raising is entirely a matter for debate.

Mr. Bottomley *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have dealt with that point of order.

Mr. Bottomley: My point of order—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have dealt with that point of order.

Mr. Bottomley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, my point of order—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have dealt with it.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman can, as ever, be safely ignored.

We have done exactly what Dearing asked us to do. There is a practical problem, which we have addressed. We are offering an independent review of how we addressed it. We can do no more, we should do no more and, on that basis, I ask the House to support us.

Mr. Hayes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As you know, I am a relatively new Member of the House. The record will show that the Minister used the words "ignorant" and "dishonest" during his tirade. Could you advise me on whether those words are parliamentary? If not, should he withdraw them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As far as I am aware, neither was applied to individual Members of this House.

I shall now put the Question.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 168.

Division No. 335] **[12.14 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*	Borrow, David
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Alexander, Douglas	Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Allen, Graham	Bradshaw, Ben
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*	Brinton, Mrs Helen
Armstrong, Ms Hilary	Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Atkins, Charlotte	Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Banks, Tony	Browne, Desmond
Barron, Kevin	Burden, Richard
Battle, John	Byers, Stephen
Bayley, Hugh	Cabom, Richard
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret	Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Begg, Miss Anne	Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Bennett, Andrew F	Campbell-Savours, Dale
Benton, Joe	Cann, Jamie
Bermingham, Gerald	Caplin, Ivor
Best, Harold	Casale, Roger
Blears, Ms Hazel	Caton, Martin

Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemplown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Janet Anderson and Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter

Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and
Mr. Edward Davey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House disagrees to the Amendment proposed by the Lords in lieu of the words left out of the Bill in page 22, lines 31 to 39.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to the amendment proposed by the Lords in lieu of the words left out of the Bill in page 22, lines 31 to 39: Mr. Damian Green, Mr. David Jamieson, Mr. Tony McNulty, Mr. Phil Willis and Mr. Brian Wilson; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to the Lords amendment reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

EC Preliminary Draft Budget for 1999

That this House takes note of European Community Document Nos. COM(98)300, the Preliminary Draft Budget of the European Communities for 1999, and SEC(98)800, the Commission's Overview of the Preliminary Draft Budget; and supports the Government's efforts to maintain budget discipline in the Community.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Income Tax

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the draft Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Oman) Order 1998 be made in the form of the draft laid before this House on 2nd June.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the draft Double Taxation Relief (Air Transport) (Hong Kong) Order 1998 be made in the form of the draft laid before this House on 2nd June.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the draft Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Kazakhstan) Order 1998 be made in the form of the draft laid before this House on 2nd June.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Badgers

12.27 am

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I have the honour to present a petition co-ordinated by the National Federation of Badger Groups, representing 50,000 citizens of the United Kingdom. The petition reads:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The Humble Petition of the Citizens of the United Kingdom sheweth;—

1) That the use of snares to trap animals is indiscriminate.

2) That the use of snares causes great suffering and stress to all animals.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your Honourable House will take all such measures as lie within your power

1) To abolish all snares.

2) To protect all animals from inhumane forms of trapping.

And your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

The use of snares is vile, inhumane and indiscriminate, and the petition has my full support.

To lie upon the Table.

Back Pain

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

12.29 am

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to discuss back pain, an issue that affects many people's lives.

I am lucky in that, to date, I have not suffered back pain. However, since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have gained empathy for people who do. I had not realised before my election that Members of Parliament are like nomads: they seem to spend a lot of time moving from place to place, carrying in bags what feels like everything they own. As I travel from my Westminster office, to my constituency office, to the House of Commons Library, loaded down with paperwork, I am conscious that my neck and shoulders ache at the end of the day. Indeed, shoulder and neck problems are among the commonest problems presented to the occupational health unit in the Palace of Westminster.

Why is it that receptions that we have to attend seem to entail standing around for a couple of hours when every bone in our body tells us that we want to sit down? Then there are late-night sittings, when I try to rest between votes in armchairs that are totally unsuitable. Such sittings may be part of democracy—although not for much longer, I hope—but they are not much good for the back, so, although I have been lucky so far to have avoided back pain, I am not sure that it will not catch up with me later. Therefore, I come to this debate not as an expert, but just as someone who would like to share a few ideas and observations.

When I was elected last year, one of the first events to which I was invited was a back pain awareness day organised by Peter Moore of the Havering branch of the National Back Pain Association. It was at that awareness day that I became aware of the scale of the problem, and of how many people are affected by back pain. The association issued "back facts", which show that there were some 117.56 million days of certified incapacity in 1995–96, 30,715 work-related back injuries, 33,000 work-related accidents and 500,000 work-related illnesses. The cost to industry is at least £5.1 billion, and to the national health service £480 million. The occupations with the highest incidence are, as hon. Members might expect, nursing, agriculture and construction.

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992, designed to protect adults in the workplace, assume that loads of up to 20 kg that are held against the body will not be carried more than 10 m without rest. I want to talk about a group of people who are not covered by any regulations: our children.

There has been a worrying increase in the incidence of back pain among young people. From studies, it looks as if many of the causes can be prevented. One such cause is the carrying of heavy school bags. When I was at school, which admittedly was a long time ago, children had their own desks where they could leave books and equipment. That is no longer the case in the vast majority of secondary schools. Children now seem to carry their whole lives around with them.

[Mrs. Eileen Gordon]

I remember my two teenage children staggering out of the house with bags that I could not even lift, plus, in my daughter's case, a cello. I felt sorry for them, but now I know that they could have been doing real damage to their still growing, immature spines.

Some children carry around 13 per cent. of their body weight. In some cases, children carry 60 per cent. of their body weight—sometimes it is as much as 25 kg, or around three stone. The highest risk group are 11 to 12-year-olds carrying up to 25 per cent. of body weight. Forty-four per cent. of children carry those heavy weights for up to the 25 minutes that it takes them to walk to school, as well as carrying them around school.

Children carry not only heavy weights but uneven weights. They tend to carry their bags on one shoulder, rather than distributing the weight more evenly by using both straps on a rucksack-type bag. Fashion has a lot to do with that—although some schools do not permit bags to be placed on both shoulders, as swinging a rucksack on to one's back could be hazardous. However, it is an even greater health hazard to carry an unbalanced weight. Schools must be made to realise that fact and the importance of wearing bags properly.

Lockers in schools would help, as children would then at least not have to carry their bags around all day. However, only 40 per cent. of secondary schools have a locker available for each child in the school. I am proud to say that the school in which I serve as a governor—Marshall's park school, in Romford—provides a locker for each child, and, just as important, encourages students to use them. Schools that do not offer such a facility should seriously consider doing so.

Perhaps parent-teacher associations could take locker provision on as a project. However, I think that lockers may be one matter on which the Government should consider regulating. Locker provision for new schools could be incorporated at the planning stage, by ensuring that corridors are built sufficiently wide to accommodate lockers.

Young people think themselves immortal, and really do not think about what will happen in 20 or 30 years—and why should they? It is up to us as adults to build a framework that will prevent injury to our young people, either now or in the future. I believe that the Government should be considering regulations to protect our children that are similar to those protecting adults. Health and safety regulations, quite rightly, are very strict in trying to protect people at work. Our young people deserve no less than to have regulations determining maximum weights that should be carried. Some countries already do so.

The National Back Pain Association recommends that the ideal bag weight objective is 10 per cent. of body weight. The association is also conducting trials on a specially designed bag. The challenge will be to make such a bag desirable to young people. I hope that head teachers and education authorities will support such initiatives to lighten the load of our students.

Let us make no mistake about it: back pain can dominate and debilitate people, making their lives a misery. Chronic or severe pain can lead to severe depression and an inability to lead a normal life.

Back pain treatments were mediaeval—in which people had to lie on a board for weeks on end and rely on pain killers. My husband had to undergo such treatment, after his back seized up as he was running for a train. Although his pain was obvious, he was given no real advice on how to deal with it, or on rehabilitation. Thank goodness the old treatments are now discredited. For most back pain similar to that which my husband suffered, two days in bed is considered better than seven days—or even weeks—in bed. Longer spells in bed will cause back muscles to stiffen and lose strength.

It is now recognised that self-care techniques, such as pacing—by performing tasks in a measured and controlled fashion, without overdoing or straining—stretching and relaxation, can greatly help with back problems.

There are very positive developments in treating back pain. One excellent example is the input pain management programme at St. Thomas's hospital. After careful assessment, sufferers are equipped with techniques that help them to live with their condition, build up stamina and improve mobility. Many people disabled with back pain have been able with the programme's help to return to work. One person who was helped by the scheme said:

"Before, I was lucky to be able to walk for 10 minutes without pain. I have just completed my first one-hour walk and felt that I could have gone on longer."

I have mentioned St. Thomas's programme specifically not only because it was drawn to my attention but because I have read the excellent advice that it provides to its general practitioners. Moreover, it is only across the river from this place. I am sure that there are many other examples of pain management units, but I understand, however, that provision is patchy throughout the country. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to look at any similar schemes around the country, and to spread best practice so that equality of treatment is available.

The British Medical Association in its "Home Healthcare Guide", issued to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the national health service, gives positive advice on back and neck pain, emphasising relaxation exercises and the need to exercise to strengthen stomach, neck and side muscles.

Awareness, support and information are important. The Havering branch of the National Back Pain Association has hundreds of members. For those who miss the meetings, a video is available. For those depressed by chronic pain, there is a listening ear service, and for those who want more information there is a library and a newsletter. It is even on the internet.

In the past, too many people with chronic pain felt isolated. Support groups take away that feeling. Nothing is worse than feeling that one is the only person with a particular problem. Again, I thank Peter Moore for his excellent work, and for staying here tonight and listening to the debate. He has been there himself and still suffers chronic back pain, but he has learnt to manage his pain, and he now works tirelessly to help others overcome their problems. Pain management, with rehabilitation and support, is the ideal combination for dealing with the problem.

As I said, back pain is costing people a great deal in pain and loss of quality of life. It is also costing the country billions of pounds in lost production and health care.

There are ways in which back pain can be prevented, especially for young people, for whom serious problems that may not be evident for many years are starting now. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to look at the whole area of prevention, in partnership with the Department for Education and Employment. To help those suffering with back pain, my hon. Friend should encourage hospitals to set up pain management and rehabilitation units, and spread best practice.

We are not talking about a few people here. Some 60 per cent. of adults suffer back problems annually, and 30 per cent. of adults become chronic sufferers. National Back Pain Week begins on 5 October, so it is appropriate that we have managed to debate the matter before the summer recess. The National Back Pain Association will be holding many activities, and the specially designed school bags will be available. Hopefully, all right hon. and hon. Members will take part in local awareness activities during the week, especially with local secondary schools.

We all lead much more sedentary lives now. We tend to sit in front of the computer or television for long periods. Badly designed furniture increases the risk of back pain. That is true in schools, too. The need to keep up with technology leads to the ever-present demands to buy computers and software, but all too often children are sitting on badly designed chairs and working on unsuitable desks, not designed for computer work. Evolution has adapted us for many things, but it has not kept up with our soft lives—moving from soft beds to cars to desks and back again.

I have highlighted only a few issues tonight, but I should be glad to provide any further information I can to my hon. Friend, whom I thank for listening so intently to me at such a late hour. Back pain is a big issue, and one that I am sure the Government take seriously.

12.43 am

The Minister for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) on introducing tonight's debate, and on the extremely eloquent and informed way in which she addressed the issue. She highlighted the problem of children and young people with back pain. I appreciate, as do other hon. Members, how debilitating back pain can be, and the effect that it can have not only on the general health of sufferers, but on their social, economic and psychological well-being as well as that of their families.

As my hon. Friend said, back pain can be costly to employers and, if it is not properly treated, to the national health service. There are, however, fairly strict regulations for adult workers. It is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive to formulate guidance and to oversee the implementation of European and United Kingdom regulations.

We do not think it necessary to legislate for how people should go about their everyday tasks or how schoolchildren should carry their books or other possessions. However, I take the point, which my hon. Friend made so forcefully, that we need to take account of the damage that many young people may be inflicting on themselves. Certainly we should do well to remember that the child with back pain today may be the adult with a chronic disability tomorrow.

Nearly a third of the population will suffer some back pain at some time in the year; possibly half that number will consult their general practitioners about it. For a small proportion—about 3 to 5 per cent.—of people, back pain will be a chronic condition, which will, in many cases, prevent them from working and require them to rely on disability benefits or to claim compensation through their employers or insurance companies, with all the difficulties that that involves.

Back pain in adults can be serious, although it is generally short-lived. There are clinical guidelines on treatment and programmes of rehabilitation. Moreover, there are a number of research projects and, thanks to organisations such as the National Back Pain Association, to which my hon. Friend paid tribute, there are good sources of advice and information, including information on self-help, as she made clear.

Back pain in children brings with it different considerations, such as the effect it can have on educational development and the carry-over of problems into adulthood. The Department of Health has noted reports of an increasing number of children being referred for treatment of back pain. Although the design and weight of school bags may play a part in that, other factors—such as physical fitness, good posture and healthy life styles—are also important.

The reported increase in back pain is a matter of considerable concern for both the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment. For children to realise their full educational potential, they must be both physically fit and mentally receptive, as both Departments fully recognise—we have been working together on a number of initiatives aimed at achieving precisely that objective in schools.

The Department for Education and Employment's White Paper "Excellence in schools" identified the importance of a good education for all children, especially those who were likely already to be disadvantaged because of their social background. The Government's consultation paper "Our Healthier Nation" has continued that theme, stressing the importance of the link between educational achievement and some of the social problems that teenagers, in particular, may face.

When the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris), and I launched the initiative on healthy schools in May, we were both aware of the need to promote better recognition of the link between health and education and to encourage schools to lay down foundations on which children could go on to lead healthy, active and productive adult lives. The problem of back pain is only one aspect of that, although it is important and of growing significance.

I fully appreciate my hon. Friend's concerns about the problems that pupils may experience in carrying heavy bags and the possible effects in later life. The National Back Pain Association has focused on the problem of heavy school bags and will, I understand, promote the sale of a specially designed school bag later this year.

We are pleased to welcome that practical development, but we should remember that some children's decisions are defined by fashion and culture rather than any thought for their future health. Many children regard the odd twinge as a price worth paying to seem to their friends to be at the leading edge of fashion. There are clear parallels with parental battles over sensible footwear—not something to which a fashion-conscious 13-year-old will give a great deal of thought.

[Ms Tessa Jowell]

There may be a number of other possible solutions, such as having lockers, desks, or at least safe places available for children to store their books in school; or limiting children's need to move to different classrooms during the day. Those are matters for the school authorities, which must also take into account other factors, such as security and practicability. It is also for the school to plan its timetable and decide where and when lessons take place.

It is important not to look at the problem of heavy school bags in isolation. The general health of children and young people will affect their susceptibility to back pain and other disorders, as will posture and life style.

Although we need to recognise the prevalence of, and to do something about, low back pain in both adults and children, we also need to put it in the wider context of public health. Exercise and physical activity are acknowledged to play an important part in maintaining good health and helping to prevent not only serious conditions such as coronary heart disease or stroke, but minor disabilities that can cause distress and affect a person's mental well-being.

In children and young people, in particular, physical activity is known to have multiple health benefits. Activities such as walking or cycling can improve the growth and development of bone and muscle, control blood pressure and promote the development of a healthy body weight.

We in the Department of Health are not simply preaching about those benefits. Indeed, preaching is likely to guarantee that the message will fall on deaf ears. We are working with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department for Education and Employment to promote safe cycling and walking to and from school. We contributed to the DETR's White Paper on integrated transport, which aims to develop active modes of transport through, for example, dedicated cycle paths and better facilities for cycle parking at schools.

Last year, we funded through the Health Advisory Council a symposium of experts known as "Young and Active", which brought together specialists to agree new recommendations on the amount and type of physical activity that should be encouraged in order to benefit children's health. We have asked the council to produce recommendations that will help to inform future departmental strategy on physical activity and young people. I hope to be able to launch a report later this year.

That may seem to stray from the problem of children carrying around heavy bags of books, but I hope that hon. Members will recognise the need to see that problem in the wider context of healthy life styles for children and adults. People who are active tend to be those who were active in childhood, and children with prolonged back pain are likely to find the condition recurring when they are older. We must not forget the beneficial effect that physical activity can have on low self-esteem, particularly for children from disadvantaged groups and those with learning difficulties.

My hon. Friend's suggestion that legislation should limit the weight of children's bags is not likely to be the most practical or the best way to tackle the problem. Guidance to schools, parents and children is simpler and far more likely to be effective. The National Back Pain Association has produced guidelines for head teachers, and those have been welcomed. I should be happy to arrange for officials to meet the NBPA and other interested parties to discuss the most helpful way forward. That should be seen in the broad context of the Government's healthy schools initiative.

The Government fully recognise the seriousness of back pain. The Clinical Standards Advisory Group made a major advance in a 1994 report that highlighted the condition and made practical recommendations. One was that rehabilitation programmes should be set up for patients who had had back pain for more than three months. The report put particular emphasis on the need for an active rehabilitation programme provided in a multi-disciplinary setting with access to a wide range of professional skills and close links to other services and organisations. As well as medical supervision and physiotherapy, a programme might include education and training in back function, and the teaching of the type of relaxation and coping strategies referred to by my hon. Friend.

The findings of the advisory group were welcomed by both the professions concerned and the Department of Health. The report was distributed widely within the NHS, so that health authorities and trusts could consider action to improve services for people with back pain. As part of our plans to develop the new NHS, there will be greater emphasis on treatment and rehabilitation in the community. That should mean that most people with back pain can be seen earlier and closer to home, without the need for hospital treatment.

Back pain is a major cause of absence from work in the NHS itself. Methods of treatment must improve, but so must occupational health policies on the welfare and well-being of NHS staff. I believe that there is now more awareness of the need to give greater emphasis to promoting good back care and preventing avoidable injuries. There is a clear incentive for employers to reduce back injuries—the resultant days off work, and risks of litigation.

I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend for raising an important issue and for discussing prevention of injuries and the health of children.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to One o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

SHREWSBURY AND ATCHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL
[Lords]
Read the Third time, and passed, without amendment.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

East Timor

1. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): If he will make a statement on the recent EU troika mission to East Timor. [48701]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): At the initiative of the British presidency, EU troika ambassadors in Jakarta visited East Timor from 27 to 30 June. The purpose of the visit was to mark the EU's continuing concern about the situation in the territory, to improve our knowledge of the situation there and to support the UN search for a fair, comprehensive and internationally acceptable solution to the problem. Their report was considered yesterday at the meeting of the General Affairs Council, which welcomed their initiative and their report. I record the appreciation of the House for the courage and determination of our ambassador and his colleagues in carrying out the visit in difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

Ann Clwyd: I welcome the troika's visit and look forward to reading its report. Has any pressure been put on the Indonesian Government to have a referendum in East Timor, as required by UN decolonisation rules, so that the people of East Timor can decide for themselves the kind of future that they want? Before we give any more financial assistance to Indonesia, should not one of the conditions be progress towards that referendum? It is worth pointing out to the Indonesian Government that their presence in East Timor costs $1 million a day, a sum which they can hardly afford in the circumstances.

Mr. Cook: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that it is repeatedly pointed out to Indonesia that part of the process towards financial restructuring must be political reform, and that that must go side by side with the IMF packages. With regard to the will of the people of East Timor, my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the troika ambassadors' conclusion was as follows:

> "It is our impression that there will be no lasting solution in East Timor without a firm commitment to some form of direct consultation of the will of the people there."

That report was published yesterday and is, of course, being made available to the Indonesian Government.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's response to the original and the supplementary questions, but does he accept that Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world, that it holds an important position in its part of the world and that, despite its current political and economic problems, it is a country with which we should have on-going constructive communication and contact at all times?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the hon. Gentleman that we do do that. Only recently, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), visited Indonesia, when he met a variety of figures from Indonesian politics, including Xanana Gusmao, the imprisoned East Timorese leader. I entirely agree that Indonesia is one of the largest countries in the world and will one day will have one of the largest economies. I put it to the hon. Gentleman that, in the words of the Indonesian Foreign Minister as he expressed it once to me, East Timor prevents Indonesia from taking its full and rightful place on the world stage; it is a pebble inside his shoe which limits Indonesia's place on the world stage.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): The Foreign Secretary will be aware that oil production is about to commence in the waters off the coast of East Timor. What steps can he take to ensure that the people of East Timor benefit from the revenues from that production rather than the Indonesian Government as a result of their illegal occupation?

Mr. Cook: The best way to ensure that the people of Indonesia benefit is to ensure that Indonesia is served by a democratic, accountable system of government. We remain in close dialogue with the Indonesian Government, pressing on them the importance of that, not just in the interests of the people of Indonesia but in the interests of the Indonesian economy.

Middle East Peace Process

2. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If he will make a statement on the middle east peace process. [48702]

6. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on the current position regarding the middle east peace process. [48706]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We remain committed to the Oslo process based on the principle of land for peace. Under the Oslo agreement, the third redeployment of land on the west bank to the Palestinian National Authority should take place next month. It is a

worrying measure of the delay to the peace process that there is as yet no agreement on the second redeployment, far less to a third redeployment.

We believe that the original US proposals for a redeployment of 13 per cent. remains the best way forward. We welcome the decision of President Arafat to accept the US package as a whole. We continue to urge Prime Minister Netanyahu to do likewise, which would be in the interests of the Israeli people, in the interests of the whole region, and in the interests of peace.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, which goes some way to answering the question before I ask it. Many right hon. and hon. Friends in the House consider themselves to be friends of the state of Israel. That does not mean that they are always friends of the Government of the state of Israel. Will my right hon. Friend add to his comments an assurance that pressure will be put on the Palestinian National Authority to ensure that terrorist activity occurring within that organisation is stopped and that the continuing desire within the Palestinian charter for the destruction of the state of Israel no longer exists? With that continuing pressure on the Government of Israel, we can once again have momentum, and land for a lasting peace, which the whole House supports.

Mr. Cook: We are very active with the Palestinian National Authority in seeking to win the war against terrorism. That is why Britain has seconded a security adviser to the team of the European special envoy on the middle east peace process and why we were able, during my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's visit, to secure an agreement on security between the European Union and the Palestinian National Authority.

It is important that it is understood on both sides that, if we are to carry forward the peace process, the authority and the prestige of President Arafat must be maintained. That will not be possible if another participant in the talks constantly undermines the Palestinian status and position.

Dr. Iddon: It looks from the outside as though the Washington peace initiative has run into the sand. Unless the Israeli Government accept the package by the end of the present Knesset session, which is I believe 29 July, it looks like staying that way. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Israeli Prime Minister's prevarications on acceptance of that package and events that have occurred recently in that region—not least of which was a serious attack on the Israeli Prime Minister by the Israeli President—have created a dangerous situation? Does he feel that it might be worth while for European leaders to try yet again to kick-start the middle east peace process?

Mr. Cook: I do not know whether the suggestion of a sitting in August would be any more welcomed in the Knesset than it would in this Chamber. All the details of the package have been known since 4 May and there can be no justification for continued prevarication in coming to a decision on that package. We have hitherto bent our efforts to ensuring that we supported the American proposals and encouraged both parties to accept those proposals. I am bound to say that I think that that was the right course because it was important that there should be no diversion from the peace process. Should we arrive at the point at which the American initiative collapses and the United States withdraws from the process, that will obviously be a point at which European and other parts of the international community will have to consider what alternative way forward there may be.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Foreign Secretary remember the qualified optimism that greeted the Oslo peace accords and the feeling of admiration for the courage of Yitzak Rabin and Yasser Arafat—a feeling common both to friends of Israel and friends of Palestine alike—courage for which Yitzak Rabin ultimately paid with his life? We have come a long way since those days, have we not? Does the Foreign Secretary think that the current proposals to cede some 10 per cent. of the west bank to the Palestinians, or to expand the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, are consistent with the spirit of the Oslo agreements?

Mr. Cook: I can frankly and candidly tell the hon. and learned Gentleman that we support the United States proposal of a 13 per cent. redeployment. That in itself is a major compromise by the Palestinians, which went into those negotiations seeking a 30 per cent. redeployment and has already come down to 13 per cent., which it has accepted. To invite the Palestinian negotiators to go further would be to leave them without credibility among their own people.

It was agreed at Oslo that Jerusalem should be settled in the context of the final status talks. We regret any action that unilaterally disturbs that agreement. We should like to get to final status talks, but, before doing so, there must be progress on the interim steps.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the American policy on the middle east has, for the past 10 years, proved a catastrophic failure, with serious consequences for the future of peace and the stability of the middle east? Does he agree that now is the time for Britain and the European Community to take a more independent and more robust line of their own? What steps does he envisage taking down that road?

Mr. Cook: We were absolutely right to make sure that we gave every possible opportunity for the American proposal to succeed. If we had produced, over the past two months, a diversion from the American proposal which had taken away from either party the pressure to sign up to it, we would not have been serving the cause of peace in the middle east. If it becomes evident over the next week or two that there is no way forward on the American proposal, others will have to become more active, but, for the present, I am not for letting up the pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to sign up to a package which is in the interest of his people and, on the most recent opinion poll, is supported by 60 per cent. of them.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): One of the positive steps that the European Union has taken is the drawing up of an interim trade agreement with Israel and with the Palestine National Authority to encourage a commitment to peace in the area. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, as part of that,

the European Commission is receiving monthly reports on human rights violations in the occupied territories by the Israeli Government? What action does the EU intend to take in respect of those violations, given that there is a human rights clause in the interim trade agreement?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is correct; there is a human rights clause in all trading agreements reached by the EU. She is also correct to say that we monitor those agreements carefully; indeed, our embassies in Tel Aviv regularly produce a monitor on the growth of settlements in the occupied territories. We will continue that monitoring, and will certainly take action should we at any stage consider that to be appropriate.

My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that the trading agreement also applies to the Palestinian territories. We are anxious to achieve progress on the Gaza seaport and the Gaza airport so that the Palestinians can trade with the EU and the rest of the world.

BBC World Service

3. **Mr. Donald Gorrie** (Edinburgh, West): If he will make a statement on future funding for the BBC World Service. [48703]

7. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): What recent representations he has received about the funding of the BBC World Service. [48707]

15. **Mr. Ross Cranston** (Dudley, North): What steps he is taking through the grant-in-aid to enable the BBC World Service to provide a multimedia service. [48715]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Future funding of the World Service has been considered as part of the recent comprehensive review of public sector expenditure. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be making a statement to the House shortly.

Mr. Gorrie: I understand what the Foreign Secretary says, but we should compare financial support from Governments for international broadcasting in the current year. The United States spends 70 per cent. more than the United Kingdom, and Germany spends 40 per cent. more. In the light of that, will the Foreign Secretary ask the Chancellor to find a bit more money to help the World Service to produce the more modern services that it wants to provide, and to keep it in its well deserved position as the leading international broadcaster in the world?

Mr. Cook: I fear that, were I to do so, I should be a little bit late in the day, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have been having words in my right hon. Friend's ear for some time. Although the hon. Gentleman rightly produced the relative spending figures, we should take pride in the fact that, despite the United States spending much more, the audience of the BBC World Service is double that of Voice of America—it is by far the most successful of the examples that he listed.

Mrs. Fyfe: As one of many British insomniacs who listen to the World Service every night, may I say how much I appreciate its independence of mind and the unique quality of the service? Long may it continue, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there must be the necessary financial provision to achieve that and to keep the World Service apart from commercial pressures? Does he remember that the World Service faced a cut of £20 million under the previous Conservative Government, which only sustained pressure from the Labour party managed to avert?

Mr. Cook: Regrettably, we did not save the World Service from a 5 per cent. cut during the last Parliament. I think that the House will wait with interest to see what contrast is revealed this afternoon.

Mr. Cranston: I know from his earlier answers that my right hon. Friend considers the BBC World Service to be one of the country's most important resources, and that he will not allow the damage to be repeated.

May I ask a specific question about television services? As my right hon. Friend may know, Voice of America offers some six foreign language services, and Deutsche Welle some three. Will my right hon. Friend seriously consider varying the terms and conditions of grant-in-aid to allow the World Service to offer vernacular television language services?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend has raised a serious issue—the importance, in the modern media world, of the World Service moving with the times. Because of that, we have listened carefully to its proposals for increased digital transmission, and for the provision of an on-line service on the internet. It is important for the World Service to be available on the most modern outlets.

We are willing to look sympathetically at an amendment to the Vote to allow the provision of a television service, but the primary interest of both the Foreign Office and, hitherto, hon. Members has been in ensuring that vernacular radio transmissions continue. I do not think that any hon. Member would want the World Service to provide television at the expense of the current vernacular radio service.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that one of the legacies of the last Government is that the BBC World Service now has more listeners than not only Voice of America, but of Deutsche Welle and Radio Moscow's world service combined? Will he confirm that the current number of vernacular services will continue, and—just for the record—will he tell us exactly how many foreign languages are broadcast on the BBC World Service?

Mr. Cook: More than 40 vernacular services are provided.

Mr. Fabricant: Congratulations.

Mr. Cook: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's congratulations; but his preening would be more justified if we had not inherited a World Service that had been cut throughout the last Parliament, and if I had not inherited from the last Administration a public spending plan that did not contain one penny for the Oman transmitter, which is the World Service's largest single capital project.

Brazil (Street Children)

4. **Rev. Martin Smyth** (Belfast, South): What reports he has received on the killing of street children in Brazil. [48704]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I receive regular updates on the subject of street children, and have raised the matter directly with the Brazilian authorities on a number of occasions, most recently on 7 July.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I take it that the Minister will share my concern about the apparent further eruption of shooting of street children. Is he aware of the fear of those who work among them that some of it is being carried out by off-duty police officers, and does he know whether the authorities have taken action against those officers?

Mr. Lloyd: As I said, I have raised the issue with the national secretary for human rights, Dr. Gregori, who was in Britain last week. He has told me, on that and other occasions, that one of the first actions of the secretariat for human rights when it was established in 1997 was to study the role of the military police, and in particular their responsibility for the killing of street children.

That is a positive step, but there is no doubt that the climate of impunity in Brazil has in the past allowed the perpetrators of those atrocities to feel that they can continue without any real threat of sanctions. We are actively considering how we can help the Brazilian police with a witness protection scheme. Such a scheme would at least allow those who witness such heinous crimes to play a proper part in ensuring that the guilty are brought before the courts and, hopefully, given exemplary sentences that will lead to a proper sense of justice.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is the Minister aware that, in a recent parliamentary answer, the Secretary of State for International Development said that 250 million children in this world of ours—that is an astonishing figure—work for wages or act as pickpockets or prostitutes? Is he further aware that, during their time in government, the Conservatives consistently and continually opposed reference of such child labour issues to the World Trade Organisation? Does he agree with me that that places them firmly in the camp of the exploiters, and not on the side of the exploited?

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend is right to say that failing to protect children and to provide a proper legal framework nationally and internationally is not acceptable. Those who were responsible for such matters should seriously examine how that was allowed to happen. However, that contrasts with the role that the present Government have played. My hon. Friend will probably be aware that the Secretary of State has been instrumental in ensuring that the issue of child prostitution has been kept at the top of the agenda internationally. Those discussions will be taken forward yet again this year with a view to ensuring that those who commit the crime of abusing young children through prostitution are brought to justice in this country, and globally.

Nuclear Tests (India and Pakistan)

5. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will make a statement on relations with India and Pakistan following their recent decision to place a moratorium on future nuclear tests. [48705]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): It is important that both countries now respond to the requirements of the international community, particularly to refrain from developing nuclear weapon systems and to adhere to the global non-proliferation regime without conditions. As a step towards meeting those requirements, we welcome the moratoriums on nuclear testing.

As a friend of both countries, Britain wants to see a solution that will promote stability and reduce tension in the sub-continent. Last week, we hosted a meeting of experts from a dozen countries to consider how we could all help India and Pakistan to promote confidence-building measures and to join arms control agreements such as the comprehensive test ban treaty.

Sir Teddy Taylor: India and Pakistan are our friends and allies. Every one of us should have a feeling of guilt that we left those countries with unresolved nightmares, of which Kashmir is only one. Will the Foreign Secretary make it abundantly clear that he will use all his power to seek to resolve these nations' problems with the international community, especially in view of the fact that they are now making a positive response by placing an embargo on future tests? Will Britain do its best?

Mr. Cook: I welcome what the hon. Gentleman says today about our efforts to try to resolve the problem of Kashmir, although I would have welcomed such sentiments when this matter was discussed last November following the remarks that I am alleged to have made on Kashmir. The international committee attaches the highest importance to trying to resolve the source of the tensions between India and Pakistan. This is primarily a matter for the parties in the first instance, and they must try to find a solution that is acceptable to all the people of Kashmir—whether Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim. However, if they require the support of the international community, I am sure that it will be forthcoming.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Will my right hon. Friend take every opportunity to continue to express to his opposite numbers in Pakistan and in India the real concerns felt by our constituents when those countries carried out nuclear tests? Will he reinforce the message that, rather than increase their country's security, they led to a much less stable south-east Asia, and lowered the standing of both countries within the international community?

Mr. Cook: Any observer of the situation involving the two countries is bound to conclude that the tests have increased tension rather than increased security. The tragedy is that the tests have given fresh impetus to the voice of extremism, and not to the voice of moderation.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Does the Foreign Secretary consider it a matter of concern that the Foreign Office did not seem to have any intelligence or forewarning of the recent Indian nuclear tests?

Mr. Cook: It is a matter of concern, not only to us, but to our partners. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot say anything further on intelligence matters.

Sierra Leone

8. **Mr. Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover): What recent meetings he has had with other Commonwealth countries regarding Sierra Leone. [48708]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I discussed Sierra Leone at the most recent meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 2 and 3 March. I then took part in a CMAG mission to Sierra Leone on 31 March with colleagues from Zimbabwe, Ghana, Canada and Malaysia.

Mr. Skinner: When my hon. Friend next meets Commonwealth Ministers, will he tell them that a debate that was staged last week on Sierra Leone—one of those great parliamentary occasions that was much heralded—turned out to be a damp squib? It seems that the caravan and the barking dogs of the Opposition have moved on and are encamped on Derek Draper's doorstep.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend will forgive me if I mention only in passing last week's debate. I might tell my colleagues in the ministerial action group that, although the Opposition wanted to enter a narrow blind alley in that debate, the reality of Sierra Leone is continuing murder, mutilation and torture of innocent civilians by the Revolutionary United Force rebels. The world might think that that was a far more serious issue for Britain and British foreign policy. We look forward to the Opposition joining in a serious debate about the future of all the people of Sierra Leone, including those who will have to overcome the memories of the torture, the horror that so far the Opposition have failed to mention.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Can the Minister say whether the report by Sir Thomas Legg will be published before the recess?

Mr. Lloyd: As the hon. and learned Gentleman ought to know, the Legg report is an independent one. Not long ago, Sir Thomas Legg wrote to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee advising him that he still hoped that the report would be with the Secretary of State by the time that Parliament rises.

EU Enlargement

9. **Mr. Ian Pearson** (Dudley, South): What consultation he plans to have with other EU countries on proposals for Agenda 2000 relating to EU enlargement. [48709]

19. **Mr. Don Touhig** (Islwyn): What consultations he plans to hold with other European Union countries on Agenda 2000 in respect of EU enlargement. [48719]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): The Cardiff European council agreed to adopt the Agenda 2000 proposals by June 1999. In the meantime, Agenda 2000 and European Union enlargement will be the key issue in my regular contacts with my European colleagues.

Mr. Pearson: I welcome the rapid progress towards admitting the five central and eastern European accession countries to the European Union. Does my hon. Friend agree that, just as the EU should be regarded by British companies as their home market, so should Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Estonia? Is he aware that, in terms of export performance and direct foreign investment, Britain compares badly with Germany, France and many other EU countries? In conjunction with the Department of Trade and Industry, will he consider what further steps the Foreign and Commonwealth Office can take specifically to target those accession countries so that we can assist and encourage British businesses to do more work there?

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, because it is pertinent to the whole enlargement issue. Enlargement offers an enormous opportunity to British exporters. Those new marketplaces can create a huge number of jobs in Britain, but that will happen only if we take the opportunity that is open to us. A priority of my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry is to try to stimulate British interests, not only in exports, but in investment in those areas.

Mr. Touhig: Is my hon. Friend aware that, while enlargement of the European Union is broadly welcome, at least on this side of the House, it must be accompanied by reform of the common agricultural policy? The previous Government ignored such reform, and cost us millions of pounds as a consequence. Does he agree that we must reduce the proportion of the European Union budget that is used for the common agricultural policy, and that that must be at the core of the Government's programme and their policy on enlargement?

Mr. Henderson: My hon. Friend is right. In the long term, it is essential that the objective that he has identified is attained by the European Union. He is also right to highlight the fact that, over all the years of Conservative government, there was no progress on reform of the agricultural policy. We have better relations with our European counterparts and we shall be able to take advantage of the opportunity to negotiate. The Commission has presented reform proposals on cereals, dairy products and beef, which will potentially save British consumers £1 billion a year. That is a highly desirable objective, and it is a top priority in the negotiations.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does the Minister support the view of the Austrian Foreign Minister, Mr. Schüssel, that negotiations on the process of enlargement should be accelerated? Will he give every support to the Austrians in their view that significant progress can be made on common agricultural policy reform during their presidency?

Mr. Henderson: It is important for the management of the European Union that there should be continuity

between one presidency and the next. I hope that we established good continuity with our Austrian friends. The priorities identified by the hon. Gentleman are priorities of the Austrian Government, which we support.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Does the Minister agree with the *Financial Times* that

"failure to inject momentum into reforms"

on Agenda 2000 was the

"most dispiriting aspect"

of the Cardiff summit? Does he agree with the Finnish Prime Minister that enlargement after the British presidency is

"looking more problematic than it did a year ago"?

The Foreign Secretary described enlargement as one of the top priorities of the presidency. Is not the truth that it was one of its biggest flops?

Mr. Henderson: I do not mind taking criticism where criticism is due, but, on the matter of taking the process of EU enlargement down the track, the Government played a crucial role in making sure that speedy progress was made. That is acknowledged by all our partners in the EU, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman will find if he speaks to them. An important European conference took place in March, which was described by the Romanian European Minister as an historic day. That feeling was shared by all the countries of central and eastern Europe.

The accession process began on 30 March. I have even had some central and eastern European countries complaining that we were asking them to make progress too speedily, and they were not ready for some of the screening tests. I am happy to take such criticism. Our friends in those countries have now got their act in order and are making progress. I am confident that enlargement is on track and will be achieved.

Ms Patricia Hewitt (Leicester, West): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to congratulate the British Council on the work that it is doing, building relationships with key members of the communities in the accession countries? Does he agree that it is enormously to the benefit of the United Kingdom and our partners in the European Union for us to take a leading role in building those relationships in the accession countries?

Mr. Henderson: My hon. Friend is right. I want to put on record the important role that the British Council plays in building relationships not with Governments or even with Opposition parties, but with the people and institutions of those countries. Such progress on the ground pays back rewards in the future. That is why it is essential that it continues to be a top priority of the British Council.

Nigeria

10. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What discussions his Department has held with the Nigerian regime about restoring democracy to that country. [48710]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I visited Nigeria on 25 and 26 June. I had a constructive meeting with General Abubakar. I reiterated our support for an early restoration of democratic civilian rule and called for the release of Chief Abiola, whose death is particularly tragic when we believed that his release had been imminent. I also called for the release of all other detainees and for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights special rapporteur to visit Nigeria.

Mr. Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should continue with the arms embargo on Nigeria? Will he confirm that British companies—certainly some companies—were arming Nigerian troops when they were in Sierra Leone? What is he doing to make sure that Sir Thomas Legg looks into the matter? That clearly was a breach of an arms embargo to a regime that we all condemn.

Mr. Lloyd: Let me explain to the hon. Gentleman that the common position of the European Union, including the arms embargo, is still in force and will continue until we see the return of Nigeria to civilian government and the release of all political detainees. Those have been the common demands of the entire European Union. Although we have no knowledge of British companies arming Nigerian troops in Sierra Leone as part of the ECOMOG forces, that would not be in breach of the EU arms embargo. The embargo is specific to the territory of Nigeria and as such would not be a matter that arose as a breach—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh.!"] Opposition Members may find that difficult to understand, but it is a simple statement of the legal position.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): Can my hon. Friend tell me what steps the British Government took to verify the cause of death of Chief Abiola? Can he give an idea of the steps that he intends to take to help secure the early release of other detainees? Will my hon. Friend assure the House that commercial interests will be put second to human rights interests in Nigeria?

Mr. Lloyd: Let me take the final part of my hon. Friend's question first. The difference between this Government and the previous Government is that our policy on Nigeria has always been pursued as one about principle and about the need for restoration of democratic forms of government. That will continue now and in the indefinite future, because it is what the Nigerian people want and deserve.

On the tragic death of Chief Abiola, the post mortem was attended by a number of outside experts at the request of the Abiola family. Dr. Richard Shepherd, a British pathologist, was in attendance and took part in the preparation of the interim report on Chief Abiola's death, which states that it was death by natural causes. We await the final report. The Government have stated repeatedly—I put this again to General Abubakar when I was in Nigeria recently—that one of the conditions that must be met for Nigeria to rejoin the family of democratic nations, and certainly to rejoin the Commonwealth, and to see the lifting of the EU common position involves the release of all political detainees, including the 20 Ogonis.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): There is no doubt that the whole House wishes to see Nigeria return to stable and democratic government. To that end, the British Council has been playing an important role through its good governance programme. Its programmes included supporting organisations trying to reduce and expose corruption, training and informing human rights

workers, and conflict management training, which has even resulted in getting opponents around the table for the first time since four years ago when they were killing each other. Does the Minister agree that that work is invaluable and that failure to sustain the budget of the British Council in that region could severely jeopardise progress towards democracy? Can he give the House a guarantee that there will be no reductions to that vital budget and no fiddling of the figures to try to present a glossy picture in the spending review?

Mr. Lloyd: I find it astonishing that an Opposition Member should talk about cuts in the British Council budget after the damage that the previous Government inflicted on the work of the British Council on a global basis. It is truly astonishing that the hon. Lady should have the gall to come to the Dispatch Box with that statement. However, the hon. Lady, like the whole House, must wait with patience to hear the statement from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in just a few minutes. I hope that, at the end of that statement, she will have the good grace to be fulsome in her congratulations and to reflect on her need to criticise the actions of her colleagues when they were in government.

Developing Countries

11. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): When he will next meet his European counterparts to discuss EU relations with developing countries. [48711]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): I discuss aspects of the EU's relations with developing countries at most meetings of the General Affairs Council. The next General Affairs Council will be on 5 October.

Helen Jackson: The European Union has a very proud record of support for black independence and the anti-apartheid movement in southern Africa. Those emerging countries depend for their continuing success on developing successful trading conditions. Can the Minister tell me what Britain is doing positively within the European Community to develop fair trading agreements within Europe as an economic community and with the countries of the Southern African Development Community?

Mr. Henderson: Essentially, we are doing two things. First, where we can, we are supporting bilateral arrangements between the European Union and countries in southern Africa. We have pushed firmly over the past six months to try to conclude an agreement with South Africa, urging that more flexibility be shown. Secondly, we have taken action on the Lomé agreement, which relates to trade matters and other related matters between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

At the General Affairs Council at the end of June, agreement was reached on the European Union negotiating mandate. Negotiations will begin on 30 September. We shall be pushing hard to ensure that a firm and fair deal is reached that will be of considerable advantage not only to the European Union but to countries that are members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Does the European Union support a Nigerian being appointed to head the Sierra Leone army?

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question, although I am not quite sure how it relates to the main question. I shall look into the matter and come back to him on it.

Ms Tess Kingham (Gloucester): Will my hon. Friend take the opportunity when meeting his EU counterparts to mention the increasingly worrying situation in Western Sahara? Morocco seems to be taking every opportunity that it can to obstruct—it is hellbent on objecting to—the Western Sahara referendum. Will he guarantee the House and assure the Saharawi people of Western Sahara that we shall not allow Morocco to foil the long-awaited referendum process in Western Sahara, and that we shall push our EU counterparts to ensure that that referendum takes place as soon as possible?

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and hope to reassure her that we shall be doing everything we can to support the Baker process, which is trying to improve the situation in countries that are crucial in the relationship between the European Union and the ACP group.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In the light of evidence of disruption of the Togo elections by President Eyadéma, and the European Union observer's report that the Togo Government wrongly stopped counting in the middle of that election, will the Minister discuss with his European counterparts what measures would be appropriate to take to bring Togo back to a democratic path?

Mr. Henderson: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that we shall do what we can about the matter by raising it at the European Union African working group. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), who deals with Africa matters, has been in contact with the opposition parties in Togo. We are hoping that that contact will help to create a situation in which stability can be established.

European Union (Public Information)

12. **Mr. Bill Rammell** (Harlow): If he will make a statement on the Government's proposals to provide increased public information on the decision-making process in the European Union. [48712]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): We made good progress during our presidency of the European Union to make EU decision making more open—for example, by an agreement to establish a public register of Council documents. We shall continue to push for greater

openness—for example, in measures to be drawn up for implementation of the relevant provisions of the treaty of Amsterdam.

Mr. Rammell: I thank the Minister for that response, and welcome the real progress that was made during the British presidency. Will he urge his Austrian colleagues to continue making greater transparency in European decision making a priority? Specifically, more Council of Minister meetings have to be opened up to the press and public. Will he also endorse the developing practice in the House of Ministers appearing before Select Committees both before and after Council of Minister meetings? Such measures will bring greater legitimacy to the decision-making process in Europe.

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think that *Hansard* will show that Ministers from my Department have attended Select Committee sittings on many occasions—and on more occasions than our predecessors in the previous Government. We take seriously that form of scrutiny and accountability.

If the European Union is to build public support and carry the European public with it through the difficult times ahead, as the big issues of European Union enlargement are dealt with, it is crucial that the European public should know what is happening and, based on that knowledge, become committed to those events. The need for such knowledge is why we have extended open debates, and why, during our presidency, we increased public scrutiny at General Affairs Council meetings and introduced a public register. It is also why we shall continue to press for implementation of more measures arising from the Amsterdam treaty.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): In their half-time presidency report, the Government described one of their key achievements as

"a seminar of government press officers"

agreeing to disseminate more information about the EU via the internet. Will the Minister now reveal how this bold and striking achievement is progressing? Does the database include, for example, unhelpful comments such as those made in the *Daily Express* on 13 June by a certain Mr. Derek Draper—then still a member of the charmed circle—who, with massive irony, challenged his readers:

"Did you know that Britain had a Minister for Europe? Do you know his name?"

Can the House have some clarity on that failure to communicate with the public?

Mr. Henderson: The hon. Gentleman should by now have learnt not to believe everything that he reads in the newspapers, and perhaps not even everything that he reads on the internet. The internet is a modern form of communication. It might not be terribly open to hon. Members, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that most young people in this country use it. That is why it is important that we maximise the information about the European Union and, for that matter, other issues of parliamentary interest on the internet.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will my hon. Friend ignore those silly comments from that member of the Opposition Front-Bench team, and agree that the internet is a very powerful tool for communication with the parliamentarians of Europe, of whom there are nearly 5,000? Will he take some interest in the group of parliamentarians entitled Interparle, which is actively campaigning and putting together a programme that will provide access, information and knowledge, as it is those things that will strengthen the European Union?

Mr. Henderson: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that he will accept that my main answer covered the matters that he raises. I found it amusing the other day that, when I told a European Union ambassador that I was going to meet another ambassador from the European Union after my meeting with him, he said that he knew I was, because it was on the internet.

Kosovo

13. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): If he will make a statement on the situation in Kosovo. [48713]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The situation in Kosovo remains tense and there is a real risk of further deterioration, unless there is serious political dialogue between both sides.

We continue to work with our contact group colleagues to broker dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, with our European partners to monitor the behaviour of security forces, with the Red Cross and the United Nations to support refugees, and with our NATO allies to deter military offensives against centres of civilian population. The quicker that President Milosevic accepts that there must be meaningful autonomy for Kosovo, the better will be the prospects for a negotiated solution.

Mrs. Winterton: Bearing in mind the imperative of preventing Kosovo from declining into a second Bosnia, will the Foreign Secretary say what concrete progress the British Government and the European Union have made in the pressure exerted so far on the Serbian president, Mr. Milosevic? Does he believe that other leaders, especially perhaps President Yeltsin of the Russian Federation, can play a constructive part in helping to achieve a politically brokered solution in Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Lady asks about the practical steps that we have taken. We have imposed an arms embargo, a visa ban and an export credit moratorium; we have frozen the funds held abroad by both Serbia and the Former Republic of Yugoslavia Government; and we have now introduced a ban on flights by the Serbian airlines. If the hon. Lady has any ideas to add to that list, we would willingly accept them.

I understand what the hon. Lady says about President Yeltsin. We welcome the offer made by President Milosevic to him. Sadly, the evidence to date is that President Milosevic is not honouring even the commitments that he made to President Yeltsin.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the Government's policy of limited autonomy for Kosovo is still tenable, given that months

of Serb aggression in that province mean that a growing majority of Kosovars will settle for little less than full independence?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, if President Milosevic had responded to our urging three months ago to enter into negotiations for meaningful autonomy, we might well have been able to achieve a solution which, frankly, might have been more acceptable in Belgrade than anything that is likely to be agreed now. However, we have to be extremely careful about endorsing any demand for independence, because of the wider impact on the region. If we concede independence in Kosovo, how do we resist those who are demanding independence for the Republika Srpska in Bosnia, which would defeat both the Government's policy and that of the previous Administration?

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Ultimately, will not self-determination be the only democratic road to peace? As the Government believe in self-determination as the correct justification for our role in the Falkland Islands and for the majority will to prevail in Northern Ireland, how can they set their face against self-determination as a potential cure for the insidious conflict that prevails in Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to take a stand on democracy, let me remind him that, only two months ago, Dr. Rugova was re-elected by the overwhelming majority of the Kosovo people in a ballot that the Kosovo Liberation Army urged them to ignore and despite a boycott that they chose to ignore. Dr. Rugova and those around him have repeatedly made it clear that they are willing to enter into negotiations without precondition.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I share my right hon. Friend's concern that any move towards independence for Kosovo could lead to greater ethnic-based conflicts in Europe. Following a previous question, does he agree that every effort must be made to persuade Russia that it is in its best interests to end the continued conflict in Kosovo, that it has a crucial role to play in achieving a peace settlement and that, in the long term, peace and prosperity for the Russian people and for Europe can best be achieved by Russia and NATO working in partnership?

Mr. Cook: I assure my hon. Friend that we lose no opportunity to urge those views on Russia. Russia well understands that its own interests in the Balkans will not be served by supporting one regime that is increasingly isolated there.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): On 10 March, the Foreign Secretary said that President Milosevic had been given 10 days to withdraw paramilitary forces from Kosovo. On 7 April, he said:

"we are determined that Belgrade should stop behaving as it is in Kosovo".—[*Official Report*, 7 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 146.]

On 8 June, he said:

"Mr. Milosevic should back down and he should back down now. This is his last warning."

Given the continuing deterioration in Kosovo, which is of deep concern to us all, has the Foreign Secretary yet learned the futility of empty threats?

Mr. Cook: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman looks at what has happened in Kosovo since 8 June, he will find that President Milosevic has not returned to the major military offensive that he was conducting then, which rendered 50,000 people homeless in a single week. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman really wants progress in Kosovo—and I am not clear from his question whether he does—he should not suggest to President Milosevic that the warnings of NATO and the Contact Group of the United Nations are empty threats.

EU Institutions

14. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): If he will list his proposals for the reform of the European Union's institutions. [48714]

18. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What proposals he is putting forward to reform the European Union's institutions. [48718]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): At this stage, the Government have no formal proposals for reform of the institutions. However, we are examining future developments in the European Union and how Britain should approach them.

Mr. Healey: Is not Britain's gross domestic product per head now the fourth lowest in the European Union? Does my hon. Friend accept that the reform of the European structural funds must fully reflect the structural problems in the United Kingdom? What reassurance can he give areas such as South Yorkshire that there will be an increase in the United Kingdom's take of European structural funds in general and an increase in objective 1 funding in particular?

Mr. Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. If we are to proceed with the enlargement of the European Union, structural funds must be available to help the economies of central and eastern Europe to develop. That will augur well for our exports. The rest of the funding available to the European Union has to be allocated among the existing member states. A fair solution must be reached, taking account of priorities such as those that my hon. Friend mentioned in South Yorkshire.

Mr. Thomas: Is not one reason why the Conservatives failed to deliver any significant reform of EU political institutions the intemperate and extreme language used by the present shadow Foreign Secretary and his colleagues on most matters European? Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will continue to press for measures to improve the environment in areas such as the common agricultural policy?

Mr. Henderson: My hon. Friend is right. I am sure that the House realises that a Government cannot negotiate with their EU partners unless they have established a relationship. Each country emphasises its priorities, and, through a process of negotiation, deals have to be reached for the European Union. Those involved must be committed to the European Union and feel that a fair settlement has been reached. That is vital for reform of the common agricultural policy, to which I have already referred.

Comprehensive Spending Review

3.30 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Government's central objectives are high and stable levels of growth and employment and sustainable public services, built from a platform of long-term stability. To achieve this, two fundamental economic reforms have been undertaken for the long term: to take monetary policy out of party politics through operational independence for the Bank of England; and to impose a new framework of financial discipline by applying fiscal rules that achieve a current budget balance and prudent levels of debt to national income.

Last May, we imposed a two-year spending limit, and we have kept to this limit. We promised to cut public borrowing, and it has been cut by £20 billion. That fiscal tightening will be locked in to next year. To meet our fiscal rules, and in line with cautious and published assumptions, audited by the independent National Audit Office, we plan current surpluses for the next three years of £7 billion, £10 billion and £13 billion. As a proportion of national income, debt will fall below 40 per cent. By the end of this Parliament, debt interest payments will be £5 billion a year lower than if we had simply left borrowing at the level inherited from the previous Government.

In the last economic cycle, under the previous Government, the current budget deficit averaged 1.5 per cent. of national income—the equivalent of £12 billion a year extra borrowing. During the 1990s, national debt doubled. Over this economic cycle, and for the first time for decades, Britain is set to have both a current budget in balance and a sustainable approach to debt—an approach that is among the most prudent of our G7 partners, and more prudent than that of our predecessors.

All the allocations that we make this afternoon are made within and subject to this overall financial discipline, which I set out in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report", published last month. Through our new deal for the unemployed, we are tackling the bills of economic failure. Under the plans published today, the growth in social security spending for this Parliament will be significantly lower than in the previous Parliament.

Working within that framework, the comprehensive spending review has examined the most effective use of public money across and within each Department. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and to the Public Expenditure Committee of the Cabinet, for all their work.

By looking not just at what Government spend but at what Government do, the review has identified the essential modernisations and savings. The review's first innovation is to move from the short-termism of the annual cycle to the drawing up of public expenditure plans not on a one-year basis but on a three-year basis. The review's second conclusion is that all new resources should be conditional on the implementation of essential reforms: money, but only in return for modernisation; Government moving out of areas where they need not be; and, in areas where public service matters, Government setting clear targets for modern, efficient and effective services.

Today, we begin, not, as all spending announcements over the past 30 years have traditionally begun, with annual allocations, but by setting out the new three-year objectives and targets for each service. Therefore, the results that we are demanding, the new standards of efficiency that will have to be met to ensure that every penny is well spent, the procedures for scrutiny and audit that will be set in place, and the reforms that we have agreed, are all based on a modern and clear understanding that Government should do only what they have to do, but do what they do to the highest standard. I shall set out the essential changes.

First, each Department has reached a public service agreement with the Treasury—essentially a contract for the renewal of public services. In each service area, the contract requires reform in return for investment. The new contract sets out the departmental objectives and targets that have to be met, the stages by which they will be met, how Departments intend to allocate resources to achieve those targets and the process that will monitor results. The Prime Minister has decided that that continuous scrutiny and audit will be overseen by a Cabinet Committee, continuing the work of the Ministerial Committee on Public Expenditure. Money will be released only if Departments keep to their plans.

Secondly, the contract will stipulate new three-year efficiency targets for the delivery of services. Targets will range between 3 per cent. and 10 per cent; their terms will be made public. The purpose of the efficiency targets is to ensure that more resources go directly to front-line services: patient care in the health service, classroom teaching and fighting crime—a policy of promoting front-line services so that, by securing greater value for money, we secure more money for what we value.

Thirdly, in addition to efficiency targets, we have embarked on a programme of radical reform. To achieve our priorities, difficult decisions and choices have had to be made. We have already reformed student finance; we have begun welfare reform, matching rights with responsibilities; and, as a result of the comprehensive review, further reforms will be announced in legal aid, in procedures for asylum, in child benefit, in youth justice and with the withdrawal of unjustified subsidies. Further reforms will be announced by Ministers in forthcoming statements.

In defence and in the Foreign Office, we have achieved the changes necessary to provide us with the defence and diplomatic capability we need, while making necessary savings by, for example, reducing the number of warships and establishing a new public-private partnership for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

Fourthly, for central and local government, we have agreed a programme for releasing assets we do not need, to fund £11 billion-worth of additional new investment in health, education, transport and other capital projects that we urgently need. With a number of further announcements today, our policy of promoting public-private partnerships is extended into new areas, including national science policy, urban policy and overseas development.

Fifthly, while we are raising capital investment for three years to tackle the backlog of underinvestment that was bequeathed to us, current spending will grow by no more than 2.25 per cent. We must ensure that public

sector pay settlements are fair and affordable, and do not put at risk our target for public service improvements in each of the next three years, for which we have budgeted.

In line with three-year allocations, the independent pay review bodies will report not just to the Prime Minister but to the departmental Ministers who have to meet those public service improvement targets and who will respond to the recommendations.

Consistent with the three-year allocation, we are announcing a further strengthening of the pay review system. Having spoken to the chairmen, the Prime Minister has confirmed that their remits, in addition to the responsibility to recruit, reward and motivate staff—and therefore their role—will be strengthened with three responsibilities. Their recommendations will take account of affordability—in other words, the current departmental spending limits; of the Government's inflation target of 2.5 per cent.; and of the need to achieve the Government's targets for output and efficiency.

That reform offers the opportunity for the public services to manage their pay and conditions more directly, but also gives Departments the responsibility to ensure that pay settlements cannot be determined without regard to the demands of the service. In that way, as in every other organisation, pay decisions will now be made in relation to the overall objectives of the service.

Perhaps the most important advantage of conducting a comprehensive spending review is the opportunity that it allows for individual services to put in place a substantial reallocation of resources within Departments—from bureaucracy to front-line services, from dealing with the symptoms of problems to dealing with their causes—and to consider a co-ordinated approach that breaks free from the old departmental fragmentations and duplication.

As a result of interdepartmental reviews, services for asylum seekers will now be managed by one Department rather than five, and the three Departments responsible for criminal justice will work together to one set of objectives. Children's services, the urban regeneration budget and our approach to tackling fraud will all be reorganised, achieving both efficiencies and savings, and other reforms will be announced by Ministers in the next few days.

Our prudence has been for a purpose. It is because we have set tough efficiency targets and reordered departmental budgets that our top priorities of health and education will receive more new money than the other 19 Government Departments combined. To accommodate that, we have had to take a firm line with other spending programmes and rigorously to select priorities. As a result, more than half of today's allocation will be invested in health and education—so there will be additional resources, but they represent money in return for modernisation.

I now turn to the allocations to individual services. Here, the main conclusion of the spending review is that it is not only a social duty for Government to invest in good public services to improve our social fabric, and to tackle poverty and deprivation by extending opportunity, but that most people in Britain, apart from a small and extreme minority, agree that it is also in the economic interests of our country to create an infrastructure of opportunity and to invest in education, science, transport and strong communities, so that individuals can make their contributions to the economic well-being of this country.

Invest in the education of our children, and we are investing in our future. In the old economy, it was possible to survive with an education system that advanced only the ambitions of the few; the new economy demands an education system that advances the ambitions of all. However, the investments that we make will take place only in exchange for further modernisation and reform.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment has agreed not only to set numeracy and literacy targets for 11-year-olds, but to set Government targets for nursery education, for cutting truancy, for higher attainment by teenagers, for improved standards of teaching, including a qualification for head teachers, for greater efficiency in further and higher education, and for the inspection of schools. In return for investment there will also be further reforms in teacher training and in the administration of school budgets.

At every stage, we are linking new investment with reform, and it is on that basis that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will tomorrow announce the biggest single investment in education in the history of our country. For that service, and for other services, there will be separate announcements, based on the Barnett formula, for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In the last three years of the Conservative Government, the growth in education spending was £7 billion. I can confirm that, for the next three years, additional education expenditure will total £19 billion. In total, we shall spend £3 billion more next year, £6 billion more in 2000 and £10 billion more in 2001. That is what we mean by "Education, education, education"—honouring our manifesto commitment to the British people.

In the 18 years of the Conservative Government, spending on education rose on average by 1.4 per cent. a year. Education spending will now rise in real terms by an average of 5.1 per cent. a year until the end of the Parliament.

We said that we would devote a rising share of national income to education, and we have. Spending on education will now rise to 5 per cent. of national income. Today, about 1 million children are still being taught in classrooms built before the first world war. Some 6,000 schools are already being refurbished this year. Over the Parliament, capital investment to re-equip our schools will now double. Following our reforms in student finance, there will now be an expansion in the numbers of students in higher and further education by the end of this Parliament—more than 500,000 additional students.

We said that we would meet our class size pledge for five, six and seven-year-olds. Under the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will announce tomorrow, our pledge will be met as we promised.

Investing in education is essential to secure both a fairer society and an efficient economy. If our country is to be equipped and prepared for the competitive challenges ahead, the Government also have an economic responsibility to invest in science and innovation, in our transport infrastructure and in building safer and stronger communities. Net public investment will be doubled as a result of the Government's new fund for investing in Britain's future, but in every area, investment is

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conditional on further reform. It is the development and application of ideas and inventions in science that hold the key to improved national competitiveness in the future.

As a result of a reduction in subsidies that can no longer be justified, and also as a result of £400 million in support from the Wellcome Foundation—which I thank for its generosity—the Government are able to announce the biggest ever Government-led public-private partnership for science for this country. A total of £1.1 billion will now be available to provide the modern facilities for science research and teaching at our universities and to support science teaching and research throughout the country. This innovative step change in our approach to science will lay the foundations for putting Britain at the forefront of the next generation of scientific and industrial research.

Any one who travels on our roads and railways knows that, after years of neglect and under-investment, Britain suffers from an overcrowded, under-financed, under-planned and under-maintained transport system. So for transport, also, we propose reform—a new investment strategy that will involve a network of public-private partnerships—like those for the underground, the channel tunnel rail link and air traffic control—and a commitment to more integrated planning of public transport. In return for those innovations, there will be £2 billion more investment. From a 25 per cent. decline in transport investment in the last Parliament, there will be a 25 per cent. increase in the next three years for investment in public transport and also to meet our environmental objectives. Full details will be set out by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in the transport White Paper next week.

Economic success and social cohesion depend on safer and stronger communities. That is why we will now invest more in the prevention of crime. That is why today we also propose a policy reform to tackle the underlying causes of poverty in the most hard-hit estates. It is because we are announcing major modernisations that will put legal aid on a fairer footing and will reform youth justice, that more resources can be made available for policing and, for the first time, substantial resources for innovative, evidence-based crime prevention work that can reduce crime. Measures to tackle drug abuse will have a new priority, with a 25 per cent. increase in funding. Further details, including targets that will have to be met, will be announced by my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the President of the Council.

To build stronger communities, it is clear that we need to renew housing stock. To cut out waste and to ensure the best use of resources, the Deputy Prime Minister will impose new guidelines for greater efficiency in construction and repair. Following the Egan report, a new housing inspectorate will audit housing management in every local authority.

With the help of those reforms, we will be able not just to tackle homelessness, but to renovate 1.5 million homes in our country. To do so, we will now allocate, from capital receipts, £3.6 billion. Our commitment to the environment also recognises the need for responsibility in the use of energy, so there will be a new programme of home energy efficiency.

We are committed to a comprehensive programme of welfare reform. Since coming into office we have introduced the new deal for the unemployed, the reform in finance for students, the working families tax credit and a new approach to child benefit. The Prime Minister has set up a welfare review which led to the welfare Green Paper, and a long-term framework for the provision of future pensions and for the reform of disability benefits will be announced later this year.

Last week we announced reforms in the Child Support Agency, and yesterday we announced new measures to combat social security fraud. The social security budget—which rose faster in the last Parliament—is set to rise by far less in this Parliament. The number of single parents on income support has fallen below 1 million for the first time in years as we have cut the bills of unemployment. Some 60,000 young people have already signed up for the new deal.

Today, I can announce further changes in welfare policy. The new deal for the unemployed is based on opportunities matched by responsibilities. It is now time to extend that approach to communities by tackling the underlying causes of their poverty. For our most deprived estates, the key problems are not just poor housing, but lack of employment and economic opportunity. In exchange for long-term targets for improving skills, educational qualifications and business start-ups in those areas, a total of £800 million will be allocated to a new deal to lift up our most deprived communities. A new deal helping the unemployed to become self-employed will be launched by the Prime Minister on Friday.

A further reform will make it possible for thousands more young people to stay on in school and to go on to further and higher education. We have to raise Britain's appallingly low staying-on rates, and a new educational maintenance allowance—linked to attendance and based on parental income—will be piloted for 16 to 18-year-olds. If, as we expect, the new maintenance allowance succeeds in encouraging more young people to stay on in education, we plan to introduce it nationally, using the money currently spent on post-16 child benefit.

As the interdepartmental review of children's services has uncovered, we spend £10 billion on young children, but we do so in an unco-ordinated and piecemeal way. Thousands of the youngest children—especially those under three—are missing out. Plans for a sure-start programme for the youngest children will be announced later this month, bringing together quality services for the under-threes and their parents—nursery, child care and playgroup provision, and post-natal and other health services. One new feature will be to extend to parents the offer of counselling and help as they prepare their children for learning and for school.

That is a significant step in the development of family policy for our country—supporting family life, encouraging stable families, and building on our national child care strategy. The Home Secretary's group will bring forward new recommendations on family policy soon.

At the heart of our review has been a determination that we fulfil our duty to the oldest members of our society. First, pensioners will benefit most from a better health service, but it has always been wrong that charges are levied on pensioners for the eyesight tests that they

regularly need to preserve sight and protect against disease. From next April, eyesight test charges for pensioners will be abolished.

Secondly, elderly people who rely heavily on public transport need a fairer deal to enable them to be more mobile. In his transport White Paper, the Deputy Prime Minister will announce plans for nationwide help with transport for the elderly.

The elderly fear their winter fuel bills. As a result of the cut in VAT, our winter fuel payment and other changes, average pensioner fuel bills are up to £100 lower this year. Later this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will announce our further plans for help with fuel bills for the rest of the Parliament. She will also announce further financial proposals to help pensioners who need help. Here, too, we are prepared to make reforms that will help alleviate poverty. From next April, every pensioner and pensioner couple will have a minimum income guarantee.

We shall also set a tax guarantee that no pensioner will pay income tax unless their income rises above a specified level. The Government will also announce measures to ensure that more people automatically receive the income they are due. As a result of the proposals, thousands of pensioners will be relieved from poverty. A total of £2.5 billion will be set aside for this important programme.

Further reforms in other services have made possible new investments that improve the quality of community life. As a result of cutting quangos and wasteful bureaucracy, and a new targeting of resources, £290 million extra will be invested in museums, the arts and sport during the next three years—not just repairing the damage of the previous Government's cuts, but a real increase of 5½ per cent., making possible improved access to museums and galleries in Britain.

As a result of asset sales in areas where spending is no longer needed, the Foreign Office budget will not only ensure more resources for the proper representation and promotion of Britain abroad, but my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is announcing today that our support for the BBC World Service will be raised by a total of £44 million during the next three years. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

For 20 years, overseas aid has been falling as a proportion of national income. Under our Government, it will now start to rise again. Because of a decision to sell a majority stake in the Commonwealth Development Corporation, raising substantial funds in so doing, and because of a new decision to target overseas development assistance on health, education and anti-poverty programmes, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development will announce today that Britain will, during this Parliament, increase overseas aid from the low of 0.25 per cent. of national income—the Budget figure that we inherited—to 0.3 per cent. of national income.

Britain will enter the millennium at the forefront in pressing for debt reduction for the poorest countries, and aid, which was falling by 2 per cent. per year under the previous Government, will now rise in each of the next three years.

I come finally to the NHS. The NHS is compassion in action—what its founder Aneurin Bevan rightly called "the most civilised achievement of modern government." The final conclusion of the comprehensive spending review is that it is fair and efficient to provide the best health service we can on the basis of need, not ability to pay, and under this Government health services will never be left to the hazards of private or charitable provision.

Yet half the beds in health service hospitals are in accommodation built before the first world war, three quarters of ward blocks are hand-me-downs from the days of charity, voluntary and municipal hospitals, and investment in the health service is long overdue. We also recognise the care, responsibility and dedication of doctors, nurses and all staff to NHS patients.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will announce on Thursday in the House targets that tackle inefficiencies in hospitals and cost overruns, simplify management structures and give a new emphasis to long-term planning. On quality, all hospitals will be required to publish league tables measuring the success rates of their treatments. During the lifetime of this Parliament, more than £1 billion will now be saved from red tape and put into patient care, in part by scrapping the costly and time-consuming internal market.

On the 50th anniversary of the NHS, the Government will make the biggest ever investment in its future, giving the health service for the first time for decades the long-term resources that it needs. Under the previous Government, the increase for the last three years was £7 billion. For the coming three years, I am announcing an increase in health service funding of £21 billion. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."]

Health Department spending rose by an average of 2.5 per cent. a year during the last Parliament. Next year, it will rise by 5.7 per cent.; the year after that by 4.5 per cent.; for the rest of the Parliament, we will achieve yearly real growth averaging 4.7 per cent.

We shall meet our waiting list pledge, as we promised. Every hospital will benefit from the 50 per cent. increase in investment in equipment and buildings, and the £5 billion fund for national health service modernisation will give us the largest hospital building and modernisation programme that this country has seen. As it starts its next 50 years, the national health service is safe in this Government's hands.

The Government have made the choices necessary to deliver stable and sustainable public finances. We have been steadfast in the priorities that we set down, which are the nation's priorities. Now, as a result of our prudence and a commitment to investment in return for modernisation and reform, a total of £40 billion more can be invested in health and education—the nation's priorities. We are a Government whose prudence allows us to build modern public services to renew Britain; a Government who are keeping our promises to the people of Britain; a Government who are, line by line, delivering our manifesto commitments; and a Government who are, step by step, making Britain better and stronger. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The House must come to order.

Mr. Maude: In the light of the press reports this morning, which include direct quotations from the

[Mr. Maude]

Chancellor's document, can the Chancellor say whether there was a single newspaper that did not receive a prior briefing? Which lobby firm does the House of Commons have to employ to get an early sight of Government documents? Once again, the Government have shown their brazen contempt for Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is no good if I have to be on my feet all the time calling the House to order, but that is what must happen if we are to have order. We must have order.

Mr. Maude: The Chancellor has confirmed today why Labour has already raised taxes 17 times, and why families are already £1,000 a year worse off under Labour. It is because Labour cannot control public spending, and because a Government without principles cannot take hard decisions and are pushed around by every crony in every spending lobby.

Does the Chancellor recall his promise that increased spending on priority services would be paid for by cuts in welfare? Does he recall who said:

"as we get the welfare bills down . . . then we can release money into education and health"?

He may recall that it was the Prime Minister, in his pre-electoral phase. That is how Labour claimed that it would square the circle. That was the basis of the myth of the iron Chancellor.

But Labour failed. Today, the Prime Minister's spokesman said about that:

"it was unrealistic that social security was going to be cut"

until

"other problems"

had been solved.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be seated.

Mr. Maude: Every one of Labour's welfare reforms has cost money, not saved it. That is why, despite what the Chancellor says, his figures show that social security spending, by the last year that is covered in the book, will be up by more than 20 per cent. in the course of this year. Does he recall warning the world of

"the myth that the solution to every problem was increased spending"?

Does he recall the Prime Minister warning his European partners that

"we will be fierce in containing public spending"?

That was the pre-election phase; what a deception it was. The Chancellor should now admit that, once the fiddled numbers are added back into state spending, it will increase over and above inflation by much more than 3 per cent. a year.

The Chancellor hopes that we will oppose his plans to spend more money on health and education, but I am going to disappoint him. Let there be no doubt that we welcome extra money for those priority services. We, after all, always increased spending on those key areas, so that is not the difference.

The difference is that, although we increased spending on key services, we kept a tight rein on spending overall, and paid for that increase honestly, because we were running a strong economy that could support increases. Under Labour, the economy is already faltering, and because the Chancellor has failed to reform welfare, he is paying for the increases in spending by raising taxes. So far, the British taxpayer has paid only the down payment. He is reordering spending all right—from the taxpayer to the state.

The Government have abandoned our programme of public service reforms, so the extra money for priority services simply will not go as far as it should. By loading extra costs on to the health service, the bottom line will be simple: there will be more money on overheads and less money on patients. Will the Chancellor tell the House how much of the extra money on health will be spent simply on pensioners who have been forced off health insurance by his vindictive attack?

How much of the extra money on education will be spent on pupils who have been forced off the assisted places scheme? Will the Chancellor admit that his spending on education at the end of four years will be only 0.1 per cent. of national income more than we delivered, and that the plans that he has published today bear little relation to those in his March Budget Red Book? Does he remember saying, only three months ago:

"By 2000, the Budget is forecast to be in balance"?—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1998; Vol. 308, c. 1099.]

He now plans no Budget balance or surplus, even in a single year; no repayment of national debt—not a single penny will be repaid; no reduction in the proportion of national income—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members clearly do not believe the numbers in the Chancellor's own book, which show that this Budget does not even get into balance in a single year.

Furthermore, the right hon. Gentleman plans no reduction in the proportion of national income spent by the state; instead, there will be an increase in every single year. We now face permanent budget deficits, the national debt increasing all the time and all over again, and the state spending ever more. In the few months since March, the three central pillars of the myth of the iron Chancellor have rusted away.

Will the Chancellor acknowledge that all his plans are based on assumptions in respect of growth, inflation and unemployment that are far more optimistic than those of most independent economists? Does he realise that those plans—which already represent a huge expansion of the public sector—are dangerously vulnerable to an economic downturn to which his own policies have contributed? Does he really think that now is the time to launch a grand plan for ever more state spending?

Will the Chancellor confirm that only half of public spending will be subject to his three-year plans, and that the remainder is demand-led? Does not his decision to abandon cash limits mean that, the faster inflation grows, the faster spending will grow? The more spending grows, the higher interest rates will have to stay, as members of the Monetary Policy Committee have said. How seriously does he expect the House to take his threats on public sector pay when *The Daily Telegraph* is briefed to carry

the headline "Public Sector Workers Face Pay Squeeze" and *The Guardian* says that the Government will announce

"extra pay for existing doctors, nurses and teachers"?

How seriously does he expect to be taken? Does he really believe that people cannot read two newspapers and compare the spin given to each? Does he accept that the so-called new obligations for the review bodies are exactly what those bodies already have?

New Labour's claim to have found a third way was based on saving money on welfare to move it into health and education. The Chancellor said so in terms last year. He said:

"We will ensure that our central aim of shifting resources from welfare to education is met through reform of the welfare state."

On his own test, the Chancellor has failed, and failed comprehensively. Will he confirm that every single welfare reform that he has introduced has cost money, not saved it—has increased dependency, not reduced it? Will he confirm that, as his press office said last week, the £5 billion a year cost of working families tax credit is being fiddled out of the public spending figures altogether? Will he confirm that the Office of National Statistics has contradicted him, and said that it will classify WFTC as a benefit in the national accounts?

Has the Chancellor not fiddled a further £1 billion a year for welfare to work out of benefit spending to massage down his spending figures, and to enable him to say what he has said? Are these not exactly the sort of accounting dodges that we last saw from the Paymaster General's old crony Robert Maxwell? More fiddles, more fudge—all intended to hide the real impact of the Chancellor's plans.

The Chancellor boasts about his intention to tackle benefit fraud. Unlike Labour in opposition, we support genuine efforts to tackle fraud; but how is the Chancellor going to do it? Where does he get his figure of £7 billion? Does he recall that, in March, Ministers were saying that there was £4 billion of fraud? What has he done in the meantime to almost double that figure? Does he agree that such loopholes are an "Alice in Wonderland" fantasy, and that the entirety of the Government's plans now rest on them? Those were the words used by his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister 18 months ago, when the Conservative Government planned to save just £2 billion a year. What has changed in the meantime? Why is there suddenly a cornucopia?

While we welcome extra money going to the pensioners who are in the greatest need, is the Chancellor not creating a two-tier system? Those who have provided for themselves will be penalised: they will not receive a penny of the increase. Is this not the beginning of a means-tested basic state pension? Will not the new scheme discriminate against middle Britain—people who work hard and save hard all their lives, and try to be independent of the state?

The Chancellor talks about his "golden rule". Does he agree with Professor Buiter, a member of his own Monetary Policy Committee, who said that the golden rule on which he places so much importance had

"no merit as a guide to optimal Government borrowing"?

In his desperate efforts to cover up his tax and spending rises, is not the Chancellor playing fast and loose with the public accounts? There is a new list of redefinitions: PSNB, PSNCR, CGNCR, TME, DEL, AME. New Labour, new definitions.

Is not the simple truth that new Labour has failed to get a grip on public spending, and has had to fall back on tax rises? The typical family is already paying £1,000 a year more under Labour. The reality is that further big tax rises or a huge growth in borrowing must lie ahead. Labour learned when it was last in government that we cannot spend our way out of recession; today, the Chancellor risks spending us into recession.

The economy is already heading down through easily avoidable errors. Manufacturing is already in recession, there have been six interest rate rises and 17 tax rises, and unemployment is already increasing. Now, the Chancellor's comprehensive failure in regard to public finance is being disguised through a series of accounting fiddles and deceptions. This is a fiscal strategy hatched by the Chancellor and his cronies in the Paymaster General's penthouse flat. Last year we had the Robert Maxwell memorial Budget, with its vicious raid on pension funds. This year, the Government have moved on: this year, it is Robert Maxwell accounting.

This is not a comprehensive spending review; it is a comprehensive spending failure.

Mr. Brown: I shall answer every one of the detailed questions of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude). It became absolutely clear during the exchanges that he does not believe in delivering public services, as we want to do. It also became absolutely clear—without him saying which services he would cut—that the Conservative party would plan a massive cut in public services.

The right hon. Gentleman says that he would exempt health and education. Given that he wants to spend more on defence, that the Opposition home affairs spokesman wants to spend more on law and order, that our rate of growth in social security spending is around half what it was under the Conservative Government, that the right hon. Gentleman has no proposals for reducing social security expenditure, and that half the extra allocation will go to health and education, he cannot escape the fact that his proposals would mean cuts in hospitals, cuts in the health service, cuts in education and cuts in schools.

The right hon. Gentleman has set his face against the public services that this country needs, so from now until the next election the Conservative party will have to explain to each constituency which hospital it would starve of funds, which school it would starve of funds and what it would do to the education and health services of this country.

Let me deal with the right hon. Gentleman's points one by one. Let us be absolutely clear about social security spending. The right hon. Gentleman talks as if he were the reformer on social security spending, but welfare spending rose by 3.8 per cent. a year under his Government, whereas it will rise by 2 per cent. a year in this Parliament, even taking into account the working families tax credit.

If the right hon. Gentleman supports reform, why does he not support our proposals on student finance, which will give half a million students places in universities and colleges? Why does he refuse to support our working families tax credit? Why does he refuse to support the new deal? Why did the Conservative party refuse to support the windfall tax that made possible the new deal?

[Mr. Brown]

We will not take any lectures on prudence from a shadow Minister who was at the Treasury between 1990 and 1992, when interest rates were 15 per cent., inflation was 10 per cent., borrowing was rising to £50 billion—its highest ever level—and imprudence was the policy being pursued by the Conservative Government.

As for our figures on public spending, why does not the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that we are reducing debt as a share of national income from 45 per cent. under the previous Government to less than 40 per cent. under the present Government? Why does he not acknowledge that current spending—which under the Conservatives grew by 1.5 per cent. a year, or £12 billion—is to be in balance under the present Government? Why does not he acknowledge the fact that we have been prudent and cautious by being prepared to sell off assets that we do not need, to set efficiency standards and rigorously to select priorities—which the previous Government never did—so that we can get money for health and education?

As I was listening to the shadow Chancellor, I thought that I should like to see the deputy leader of the Conservative party back in his former position, and then I thought of the former Chancellor. The Conservative party had 18 years of failed government, and they will have 18 more years of failed opposition.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I welcome the Chancellor's statement. Like him, to some extent I welcome the shadow Chancellor's remarks, because they clearly showed that the Conservative party is wedded to third-rate public services. The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) had apparently not read the statement, because spending over the whole Parliament adds up to less than spending in the last Parliament, so it is hardly profligate.

I also welcome the fact that the Chancellor has now acknowledged that he has a war chest, and that he is putting some of it to good use, especially in health and education. I welcome the action on top-up on pensions, and on health checks. I hope that he will acknowledge that those are two good Liberal Democrat policies, and we are happy to share them with him.

Why have we had to wait so long for this crucial investment in education and health, given that class sizes and waiting lists have continued to rocket? Little is so comprehensive in this review that it could not have been announced a considerable time ago. Does the Chancellor accept that he runs the danger of creating boom-bust in the public services just as he squeezes it out of the economy?

More money for public services—which we have been calling for—over the next three years is welcome.

Does the Chancellor agree that, viewed over the whole Parliament rather than the next three years—he conspicuously missed two years in all his comparisons—the figures are not quite so impressive? Compared with the first five years that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was Prime Minister, health spending in the life of this Parliament will rise in real terms by about 3.7 per cent. a year compared with 4.1 per cent. in the previous Parliament.

Does the Chancellor further agree that, in Scotland, the comparison is much worse, at 0.6 per cent. a year during this Parliament compared with 4.7 per cent. during the first five years under the previous Prime Minister? That means that, by 2001, the Scottish Office budget will be lower in real terms than it was in 1994–95.

Today's settlement has been advertised as a bonanza, but comparing the Prime Minister's record against the dismal record of the previous Prime Minister suggests that, overall, in health and in many other areas, the settlement is not Major-plus but Major-minus. What happens if inflation is higher than expected, as many commentators say it will be? What overshoot in inflation would have to occur before the Chancellor provided compensation for those budgets? A 1 per cent. overshoot in inflation would wipe £5 billion from health and education funding. In view of that risk, why is the departmental reserve a mere £1.4 billion?

What happened to consultation? Why has there been no consultation on £900 billion of public spending? Why has the House not had a chance to debate in advance the priorities that should be considered, and why is the system so centralised by the Chancellor, with capital spending controlled by the Treasury and performance contracts with the Treasury? Surely Ministers should be accountable to Parliament.

The problem for many people is that, by waiting two years, the Government have acted too late. Those people have suffered the squeeze. Instead of getting the better public services they were promised, they have got worse services during the first two years of Labour, and they will now have to wait to see whether things get better.

I congratulate the Chancellor on putting the emphasis on health and education. I welcome that unreservedly. We and the British people will judge the Government over the whole Parliament, not on big numbers in one day's headlines. We shall judge them on whether they deliver a genuine, palpable and significant improvement in the quality of public services. I hope that the Chancellor will accept that that is the basis on which the Government should be judged.

Mr. Brown: I suppose I should say that I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) for his limited congratulations. As it is the first time that he has managed to do that in this Parliament, I should thank him for it.

The hon. Gentleman asked why we waited before taking today's action. We did that for the very reason he mentioned, that we must get stop-go out of the system and create stability in the management of both public finances and the national economy. The person who reminded us of that was the hon. Gentleman's leader, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), who said in the debate on the Queen's speech:

> "If we tighten our belts now, we have a real opportunity to get to grips with the huge hangover of debt left behind by the Conservatives."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 74.]

It is strange that, since the right hon. Gentleman said that a year ago, he has been demanding more and more instead of facing up to the need to deal with debt.

The hon. Member for Gordon asked about spending. I would simply have thanked him for his congratulations had he not said that it was not enough. The Conservatives say that it is far too much, and the Liberal Democrats say that it is not enough. In the general election the hon. Gentleman asked for £1.9 billion extra a year to be spent on education. That is just slightly less than £6 billion over the next three years. We are spending not £6 billion

but £19 billion. Why did the hon. Gentleman not start by welcoming that? He said that we should spend £500 million a year extra on the health service and engage in some capital spending. That is £2.5 billion over a Parliament. We are spending £21 billion in three years.

Is it not about time that the Liberal Democrats, instead of finding every excuse for more and more spending and more and more taxes, welcomed the Government's progress in the development of public services? The figures for Scotland, England and Wales show that health spending is rising by 4.7 per cent. and education spending is rising by 5.1 per cent. a year. That is far more than any Liberal Democrat candidate ever asked for, and it is about time that the party recognised that the Government can combine the prudence that it has never shown with the ability to deliver proper public services.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Is the right hon. Gentleman content for me to regard today's statement as his transformation from the iron Chancellor, with two years of control of public spending, to the big-handed Chancellor, with three years of uncontrolled spending on health, education and just about every other Department in Whitehall, with no significant savings in any part? Can he persuade me that this transformation to a new, happy Chancellor is planned and prudent, rather than forced upon him?

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the figures for growth of total public spending at 2.75 per cent. real in each of the next three years are far above the figures that he planned as recently as his last Budget? Has he not noticed that this U-turn takes place at a time when interest rates are too high, the economy is slowing down too fast, unemployment is about to go up again, and his tax revenue forecasts will fall short? Will he not end this Parliament short of taxation and short of economic growth? Will he tell the cheering ranks of old Labour behind him that they may ring the bells today, but they will wring their hands hereafter?

Mr. Brown: From the Chancellor who gave us the 17 tax rises, from the Chancellor who refused to take the action necessary to raise interest rates before the general election in order to tackle inflation—*[Interruption.]* As for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's predictions today, let him recall what he said in January 1997, when we said that we would keep within a two-year spending ceiling. He said:

"Hell will freeze over before Gordon Brown could control the spending."

We took the action—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must have good order.

Mr. Brown: We took the action necessary, controlling spending. We reduced borrowing by £20 billion. We have current account surpluses for the next three years. We are meeting a golden rule that means that taxation must pay for current spending. We have a sustainable investment rule that gets debt down below 40 per cent. of GDP. We have achieved more in our planning in a year than the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) did in all the time that he was Chancellor.

The Conservatives should now face the fact that they were responsible for the inflation that has entered the system, and that we have had to deal with it. They had better tell us whether they support the independence of the Bank of England. Do they support the action that was taken on interest rates? Do they want interest rates higher or lower? Do they want public spending to be higher, the same, or lower? The Conservative party seems to be setting its face against the good modern public services that this country needs.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): As the Chancellor knows, the Treasury Select Committee will question him on the statement tomorrow. Does my right hon. Friend accept that the plans that he announced today combine fiscal prudence with a much welcome long-term commitment to spending, especially on health and education? Does he agree that the achievement of the objectives that he has announced today depends in part on the performance of Government Departments, as he said, but also on the performance of the economy?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. This is indeed a tough settlement, because it combines investment with the need for reform. I am grateful to him for drawing attention to the fact that each Department now has targets for the services that it must deliver, and stages by which those targets must be met, and that there is a process of scrutiny and audit that will have to be followed.

My hon. Friend rightly says that we have put money into the vital public services. Education was growing by 1.4 per cent. a year for the past 18 years, and 1.4 per cent. a year in the last Parliament. It will now grow by 5 per cent. a year, on average. Health service spending was growing by 2.5 per cent. a year in the last Parliament. It will now grow by twice that much—4.7 per cent. a year. We have managed to invest in the vital public services in which the country takes pride, while getting debt below 40 per cent., as we will do, getting a current surplus over the next three years, as we plan to do, and at the same time reducing borrowing from £27 billion to £8 billion over the last year. The ability to combine prudence with public services of a high standard is something that the previous Government could never achieve. It is the mark of a new Labour Government.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Those who remember the other Mr. Brown, George Brown, who introduced the previous Labour national plan with a similar degree of naive bombast, will also recall that it all ended in tears, heavily laced with whisky. The Chancellor has no idea what the main economic indicators will be showing in three years' time, but he is offering jam to everybody in the run-up to the next general election three years ahead of it. Whatever we do not know about the future for Britain, we can be certain of one thing about the future experience of the Chancellor, and it can be summed up in three words—education, education, education.

Mr. Brown: Exactly—education, education, education. We are giving £19 billion to education, and the Conservatives should be welcoming that today. On the economy, we have taken the most prudent and cautious forecast. We are running current surpluses over the next three years. We can spend on health and education in the way that the country wants us to and in the way that the economy and society needs us to, because we have been prepared to make the tough choices which reallocate money from less high priorities to our priority services.

[Mr. Brown]

I should have thought that the old Conservative party would welcome that. The Conservative party will be fighting the next election on cuts in expenditure on health and education. There has been a lurch to the right in the Conservative party, and it will pay a further penalty at the next election.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, when I was listening to the responses to his statement, it became pretty clear that those on the Tory Front Bench were concerned about the briefing for this momentous statement, the Liberal Democrat spokesman was concerned because it came a little too late, and the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer gave me the impression that he had created the situation anyway? All in all, it seems that they are all engaging in what is called belly-warming talk.

May I ask my right hon. Friend something that matters to the people in the coalfields and in the areas where manufacturing industry suffered massive losses during the 18 years of Tory Government? Is there anything that he can say in respect of the 80 recommendations of the coalfield communities task force? It has made recommendations about repairing the social fabric in areas that have suffered mass unemployment and where unemployment is still running at over 20 per cent. Will there be any money allocated for those specific proposals that we dealt with yesterday?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is precisely because of the problems in established communities that are facing unemployment and big transformations that we are introducing the new deal for communities. In the past, regeneration and other programmes have been based on the idea that, although the problems could not be solved, the consequences would be tackled, and not the causes.

We are trying to get new industry and business into the difficult and hard-hit areas. We are trying to raise the level of education and skills and trying to give adults new opportunities for jobs that they have not had for years. That is what lies behind the new deal for the communities.

It will be of particular interest in the coalfield communities about which, as my hon. Friend knows, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made a statement yesterday. He welcomed the 80 recommendations of the coalfield communities task force, and said that he would be acting on many of them as time proceeds. The new deal for communities means investing £800 million in rebuilding the social and economic infrastructure of those areas, and getting jobs and opportunities to people let down by the previous Government.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The Chancellor of the Exchequer is to be congratulated on his statement, particularly the concentration on education, health and transport. I hope that, at the end of the day, there are funds to cover all the proposed public expenditure. At a quick glance, one notices that the increase in spending in Scotland and Wales over the next three years will be 16 per cent., whereas for Northern Ireland it will be 11 per cent. One will have to look at the details to establish the reasons for that disparity.

May I ask the Chancellor one simple question? In preparation of the public spending review, what consultations—either informal or formal—were there with the central European bank?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I was pleased to be able to visit Northern Ireland before the referendum and to say that the Government will introduce a number of proposals for improving Northern Ireland's economy and transport infrastructure. I think that he will welcome the fact that we have reduced corporation tax, given reliefs to a number of small businesses, and taken major decisions on improving the Province's airport, railway, bus and other transport services. We are also spending far more in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the country on the new deal for young people, to get young people back to work.

Spending is based on the Barnett formula, which has been accepted for many years by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Allocations have been made on that basis, and it is for the Secretary of State for Wales, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State for Scotland to decide allocations within their Budget. Today or in future days, they too will make an announcement on their Budget priorities. We have given a fair settlement to all parts of the United Kingdom. I thought that that should be welcomed on both sides of the House.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will the Chancellor tell us exactly what will happen to social housing? It seemed to be very good in the statement that there would be extra money for renovation and modernisation of housing stock. However, does he accept that poor housing can lead to poor health, and that poor housing makes it extremely difficult for young people to learn? Is it not very important that, if there is not—as I think—any extra money for social housing in the next three years, we should find new and imaginative ways of getting that type of social housing built?

Mr. Brown: And it is exactly what we are doing. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to amplify on my earlier comments. The fact is that £3.6 billion from capital receipts will be invested in building and repairing existing council housing—allowing 1.5 million homes to be refurbished, and reducing the repair backlog by at least 250,000. There will also be a new housing inspectorate, as part of the best value regime, that will have real power to tackle poor management in any part of the country.

My hon. Friend also asked for new and imaginative programmes. The new deal for the communities is exactly that. It will combine action on housing with action on employment, which is what is desperately needed in most areas.

There will be over £100 million to reduce rough sleeping. Our commitment to the homeless people of this country will be met. I visited one foyer, in Slough, which had just been opened. There are now 70 foyers round the country. We want to help young people to have both the housing and the employment opportunities that will give them the future they need. Today's announcement is about a programme for new investment—with reform—in housing, particularly for those who are in the greatest difficulty.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): How can it possibly be prudent to raise public expenditure totals

above the Chancellor's own forecasts for GDP rates over the next few years without saying whether it will be paid for out of higher taxes or higher public borrowing?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should have been in the House a few weeks ago, when I explained exactly how our proposals would be financed. We have created—by the two new fiscal rules that we have adopted—a public spending control regime and financial discipline that gives us both a current Budget balance over the economic cycle and a reduced level of debt to GDP. As I said earlier today, other Governments have tried in past years to achieve a balance in the current Budget and a sustainable debt level, but have failed to do so. The previous Government had a 1.5 per cent. deficit on current spending—equivalent to a £12 billion deficit every year—but we will have a balance.

Sir Michael Spicer: Answer the question.

Mr. Brown: I am answering the question.

The hon. Gentleman's idea that that is somehow not prudent is answered by the two rules that we are applying, and by our ability to get debt below 40 per cent. and to run a current Budget balance. That is how we are being prudent. We have been able to get so much money to health and education by reallocating resources within the moneys that are available to us. We kept to our promises, and we kept within the tight ceilings we set for our first two years. We reduced borrowing by £20 billion. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would give us credit for that.

The fiscal tightening that we have achieved this year will be achieved next year as well. This is a prudent settlement, but one based on good public services. It is only the Conservative party that believes that prudence means having to cut public services and public investment. We have shown that one can have both prudence and investment in the priority public services.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, for most parents, education is an absolutely top priority, and that his statement will be met with great delight by many of our constituents? Does he agree that classes of approaching 40 pupils are simply unacceptable? Will he ensure that the money is spent in such a way that the less well funded authorities are brought much closer to the better-funded authorities, and that county councils, especially those that are Conservative-controlled, are persuaded to use the money as it is intended—for education?

Mr. Brown: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The money has been allocated for education, and Conservative-controlled local authorities should honour what the people of this country want and invest the money in education. I also agree that we must get class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds down, and the money that we have invested will enable us to do so.

My hon. Friend will be interested to know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will be making a statement to the House tomorrow. He will outline targets and the stages by which they will be met. Representing the constituency she does, my hon. Friend will be delighted to know that the investment in science laboratories in our universities and colleges—more investment in education—is at a level that has never before been seen in this country, as a result of the new public-private partnerships that we are announcing. We are investing in education, schools and universities and in research. That is an important commitment to the future of this country.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): When the froth and hype have settled, is not the truth to be found on page 109 of the White Paper? It shows a standstill expenditure budget through to April 2000, that in real terms the expenditure for 1999–2000 is lower than the average for 1994–96, and that the Welsh Office budget for 1999–2000, at £6.7 billion, will in real terms be the same as it was back in 1994–95? In a week that the Government published a paper for Wales showing that 250,000 people are looking for jobs, surely we need economic stimulation now, not jam tomorrow, in three years' time.

Mr. Brown: If the right hon. Gentleman is concerned, as I know he is, about unemployment, he should not only support the new deal for young people and the long-term unemployed but welcome the fact that we are today announcing a new deal for communities. Far from the facts about expenditure in Wales being as he is trying to present them to the House, the average annual real spending increase will be 2.6 per cent.—£2.2 billion extra over the next three years. That meets our commitment to Wales on education and health, which is one reason that the Labour Government are so popular with the people of Wales.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): This evening, many people in further and higher education across the country will be very happy with the £1.1 billion extra that is to go into the science budget, and with the extra 500,000—half a million—new places to be found in further and higher education. Do not the new commitments from the Labour Government require a new impetus from Cumbria county council to bring forward the project for the university of the lakes, a project that is greatly required in the county of Cumbria? In Cumbria, we must be at the forefront in taking our share of the vast amount of new money being brought on stream.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has always been greatly interested in education, especially in the future of higher and further education. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will listen with interest to his comments about the university of the lakes.

It is because we have taken the difficult decisions about student finance that we are able to say that there will be at least half a million more students in higher and further education by the end of this Parliament. That means that half a million people who were denied the opportunity to develop their talents and fulfil their potential because of the cap that the Conservatives put on entry into higher education will now have that opportunity.

As for science, under the Conservative Government, public-private partnerships were replacing public funds with private funds. We have shown today that it is possible to add to public investment with substantial private investment. Instead of £700 million being spent on science, £1.1 billion will be spent as a result of investment by the Wellcome Foundation.

[Mr. Brown]

These public-private partnerships, which enhance public investment in science, also make for the renewal of our science infrastructure and building for the future, in terms of the jobs that will be created and the strengthening of the economy. I hope that all hon. Members welcome what we are doing for science.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): With creative accounting, anyone can paint a picture that appears to meet all objectives. The Chancellor constantly chants the mantra of prudence, but what does he have to say about what is going on in Japan and Asia? I have been a Member of Parliament for a little over a year, and in that time I have been amazed never to hear anything from the Chancellor about the impact on our economy of the major contracting problems in other parts of the world.

I come now to the crucial point in what the Chancellor said today. If, as I fear, British economic growth and tax revenues are substantially lower than he assumes in his forecast, will his three-year spending plan hold? Will it be financed from higher borrowing or higher taxation, or will this wonderful three-year plan be revised dramatically in 18 months' time?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to tell him that I am making a public spending announcement for Britain, not the rest of the world. As for Japan, we have always said that there had to be reform of the financial system as well as reform of taxation. That remains as true today as it was a few months ago.

On public spending, I have already said that we have taken the most cautious estimate of the state of the economy. We have also been able to announce surpluses over the next three years, which is, of course, very important. However, when the hon. Gentleman examines the figures, he will notice that the main reason that we can spend on and invest in health and education is that we are committed to the health and education services, and have been prepared to make the choices necessary to reallocate resources to them. It is about time that the Conservative party acknowledged that the previous Government failed in those respects, but that we are being successful.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): With regard to the massive sums that he is pumping into housing, school and hospital services, will my right hon. Friend say what ruthless and determined action he is going to take to make sure that every pound of those billions goes to front-line services, and is not wasted by careless health, local education and housing authorities?

Mr. Brown: Before the Conservatives came to power, the national health service used to be the most cheaply and efficiently administered system, with only 7 per cent. of health service expenditure being spent on administration. Under the Conservatives, that rose to 12 per cent. of expenditure because of the bureaucracy. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will announce on Thursday that he is going to save £1 billion on bureaucracy, which will go to front-line patient care.

As for the record of the Conservative party on the health service, there were increases of 2.5 per cent. in the last Parliament, whereas we are proposing increases of 4.7 per cent. for the next three years. On Thursday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will announce the targets that will have to be met, the standards that will have to be achieved, and the inefficiencies in some hospitals that will have to be rectified.

It is because we are committed to the NHS, and because we believe that every pound of public money should be well spent, that we are capable, in a way that the previous Government were not, of securing value for money for every patient in the health service.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Will the Chancellor confirm that the base that he is assuming for this afternoon's announcement is the dreadful base that he inherited from the Conservatives, which he has prolonged for two years, and that any increase in public expenditure would be welcome alongside that starting point? Will he also confirm that, even with the increase in resources announced today, the Scottish Parliament will still have fewer resources at its disposal in 2000 when it opens than it had when one of the many discredited Conservatives was Secretary of State for Scotland in 1994? Finally, does he think it prudent that, at a time of high interest rates in the United Kingdom economy, the Secretary of State for Scotland will announce this afternoon cutting support to enterprise by £50 million in real terms?

Mr. Brown: The first to be worried about the policies of the hon. Gentleman's party are every business in Scotland for whom those policies would mean tax rises of about £1,500 a year. As for public spending in Scotland, the hon. Gentleman should welcome the fact that this afternoon my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will announce that, by 2002, all three-year-olds in Scotland will have the right to a nursery place. That achievement by a Labour Government could never be achieved by the Scottish National party.

The hon. Gentleman should congratulate us on the fact that, by 2002, there will be 5,000 new classroom assistants in Scottish primary schools. Once again we are improving the standard of education in our schools. We do not base our decisions on the economics of the SNP. We base them on the economics of the real world, and that is why we get money into health and education.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I take my right hon. Friend back to the subject of public sector housing and his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey)? In his statement, he outlines welcome money for the improvement of existing stock and dealing with the huge backlog of repairs that was bequeathed to us by the outgoing Tory Government. However, he must recognise that, in inner-urban Britain, unless young people and poor people can be provided with council or housing association properties, they have no choice but to live in very expensive private rented accommodation that is paid for by housing benefit.

Does my right hon. Friend recognise that we now need to invest massively in a house building programme that will improve the lot of the poorest people in inner-urban Britain and save money on health and education? Children are under-achieving, and people are occupying hospital beds because they live in such filthy accommodation.

Mr. Brown: First, my hon. Friend should welcome the new deal for young people, as it gives the people

he mentioned the chance to get jobs. It provides responsibility matched by opportunity, but it is the way forward. I am pleased that 60,000 young people are now part of the new deal and participating in the programme. That is why we are extending the new deal to the long-term unemployed. We are making it possible for single parents to get jobs if they want them, and many disabled men and women who want to work will also have opportunities to do so.

Secondly, my hon. Friend should welcome the fact that we are investing in innovative housing reforms that will enable young people, particularly those living in the difficult conditions he mentioned, to match the jobs and the training that they are getting with the housing that is available. Thirdly, he should welcome the fact that 1.5 million houses will be improved as a result of the £1 billion plus investment from council tax receipts in new housing.

It is a programme for employment opportunity, rebuilding communities that have been hard hit, and improving the housing stock. In particular, we are determined to help the young homeless who were left behind under the previous Government.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Page 87 of the White Paper on social security tells us that benefit expenditure is to increase from £95 billion in this financial year to £108 billion in the financial year of the next general election. In the light of those figures, will the Chancellor confirm that, when the Prime Minister said before the general election, "I vow that we will have reduced the proportion we spend on the welfare bills of social failure," he meant to say, "I vow that, with a little bit of luck, and with massaging the figures, we might stop welfare bills increasing quite as fast as they used to"?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should look in detail at what the Government are doing. First, we are cutting the bills of failure by getting young people into work—60,000 are participating in the new deal. The number of lone parents claiming income support has fallen below 1 million. In the past year, about 40,000 have come off benefit and into work, compared with 50,000 who were joining benefit under the previous Government. So the hon. Gentleman should applaud the fact that we are reducing the bills of unemployment and getting people back into work.

The hon. Gentleman should also be aware of the saving to the taxpayer of about £40 a week by people moving even from income support into family credit. The working families tax credit mean that the people concerned are about £40 a week better off. So we are making the transition, and he should applaud us for that. Despite everything that he and most of his party think, social security expenditure rose by 3.8 per cent. under the previous Conservative Administration in the last Parliament. Even taking account of the working families tax credit, it is rising by 2 per cent. in this Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman should applaud us for reducing the rate of growth of social security spending and putting in money that will enable people to get back to work and contribute to the community. We are meeting the election promise that he read out.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the question of debt relief for the poorest countries in chapter 16.8, what can my right hon. Friend say about the heavily indebted poor countries initiative? What certainties can we give those countries over the next three years?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. In addition to what we are doing on overseas aid in respect of direct Government assistance to the poorest countries in the world rising as a proportion of national income and the development aid budget rising every year when it used to fall, which I know my hon. Friend will welcome, we are contributing to debt relief.

When we took office, very few countries were part of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative. Since the G7 meeting, the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' conference and the Mauritius mandate that we launched, several countries have moved into the debt reduction process. The latest is Mozambique, which was paying an astonishing 9 per cent. of its national income in debt repayments, while investing only 4 per cent. in education and health. Along with other countries, through a grant as well as through getting debt relief off the ground in the Paris club, we have made it possible for the heavily indebted poor countries initiative to extend to Mozambique.

Our new task is to move on to other countries that we can help. I am particularly interested in post-conflict countries such as Rwanda and Liberia that do not have the wherewithal to rebuild their economies and are burdened by unsustainable debt. It is now time for new initiatives to be launched, and I know that my hon. Friend will want to help and support us in those efforts.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Neither the House nor the public will have missed the fact that, although the Chancellor undertook to answer "in detail", to use his words, the questions he was asked by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, he did not answer or address a single one of them. He just went off on his usual rant, and then sat down.

Will the right hon. Gentleman give a straightforward answer to the straightforward question from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh)? Is it not a fact that he has now definitively abandoned his commitment to reduce social security spending as a share of national income? It is quite obvious from his own figures that that is the case. Why does he not have the courage and straightforwardness just to admit it?

Mr. Brown: I actually have the figures. Social security spending as a proportion of national income, which we inherited at around 12 per cent., is falling to 11 per cent. However, under the previous Government, in the last Parliament it rose by 3.8 per cent., and it is rising by only 2 per cent. under us.

The hon. Gentleman must distinguish between the costs of failure that we are definitely reducing with the new deal and other measures, and what is entirely right support for poor pensioners as part of the social security budget and child benefit. He should support us in easing poverty among pensioners. I for one am not prepared to continue with the situation that existed under the previous Government, when thousands of poor pensioners were left without hope of getting anything more to take them out

[Mr. Brown]

of poverty. We shall take the necessary action, and he should support us in that. As for cutting the bills of failure, that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): My right hon. Friend's statement has more than lived up to its trailers. When we consider future investment incentives, how to share out the money to rebuild smashed city neighbourhoods after so many years of neglect, how to meet health needs and raise educational standards, can he assure me that the needs of my own north-east region will be met in precisely the same way as the needs of Scotland and Wales—need for need, head for head and pound for pound, with fairness and without favours?

Mr. Brown: It is because of what my hon. Friend says that we are giving young people in every part of the United Kingdom the right to training or work after six months of unemployment. Every person in every part of the country who has been unemployed for more than two years will receive help worth £75 a week to get a job. The Government agree with my hon. Friend that there should be a needs-based approach. That is why the measures for single parents and for the disabled apply to the whole United Kingdom.

I hope that my hon. Friend will involve himself in shaping the new deal for communities in Newcastle. We wish that we had had the chance years ago to tackle not just the consequences of poverty, but the real causes. We must do that together.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We must now move on. There is much else to be done, and I have to protect the remaining business of the House. I point out to hon. Members that, as the Chancellor has said, there will be several statements in the next few days, when there will be opportunities for further questions.

BILL PRESENTED

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM BILL

Mr. Tony Benn, supported by Ms Diane Abbott, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, Mr. John Cryer, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Alice Mahon, Mr. John McAllion, Mr. John McDonnell, Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, Mr. Richard Shepherd and Mr. Alan Simpson, presented a Bill to provide for the election of a Council of State to replace the House of Lords; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 226].

Education (Schools Parenting Role)

4.59 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to recognise the in loco parentis role of schools through amendment of the Ofsted inspection procedures; and for connected purposes.

The destiny of our nation is inextricably linked with the future of our nation's children. We have heard about that today. Their formative years spent at home and at school determine their lives and the course of society in our country.

With the sad weakening of the family unit and changes in adult life styles, it is increasingly falling on schools to provide youngsters with advice and help that would normally be given by parents. State schools are recognising that their role can no longer be just to educate in the normal sense of the word, but often is to be in loco parentis, providing the help, advice, support and comfort previously provided by parents.

That has long been the role of boarding schools, but the great achievement of our state schools has been their ready acceptance of that task. Some teachers in special schools believe that the parental role provides more practical assistance to pupils than any mainstream education. I understand that. In a few instances, children at special schools are neglected by their parents and find traditional learning difficult or impossible. Is the work of teachers in such schools, as well as in mainstream schools, to be ignored? The aim of my Bill is to recognise the parenting work of teachers; to recognise that teachers must play their part in providing an example of how to behave, imbuing moral values and showing children how to play a constructive part in society.

That vital work is an investment in all our futures. My Bill would require the Office for Standards in Education to recognise that in its reports. Schools that excel in such work also deserve the epithet "beacon". The work of teachers in providing such guidance should be universally applauded.

It would be wrong to think that such parental advice might be missing only in single-parent families or in deprived areas. Even in the leafy lanes of Lichfield, young people are often unwittingly neglected by busy parents—perhaps their fathers work late and their mothers, returned from work, have gone to keep-fit classes. I know of youngsters left alone to eat a pre-packaged meal while watching television or surfing the internet on their bedroom computers. Not for them the family meal and parental support. Deprivation takes many forms.

Providing parental guidance at school is nothing new. Boarding schools have long recognised the need to provide a balanced programme that partly substitutes for the support normally offered by a parent. For the past 100 years, many day schools have also taken up that duty.

For the past 10 years, there has been recognition in law that state schools should also play their part. Since the Education Reform Act 1988, piloted by Kenneth Baker, schools have been required by law to deliver

"a balanced and broadly based curriculum which—

(a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and

(b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life".

We also require teachers to be legally in loco parentis, with all that that means for pastoral care and welfare. For too many children, that important duty represents the main stability in their life. Such a source of guidance, spiritual well-being and moral fibre may not exist in their life away from school. Such pressures and expectations have been developing and will continue to expand as we move towards greater integration of students into the unified state education system.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise that teachers play a major role in preparing young people for life. Of course they must include the three Rs and the rest of the core curriculum, but we are right to expect that our children should experience a range of skills, including communication, problem solving and working with other people.

Schools and their teaching staff have been going through a period of constant change. We know that we all live in a changing world, but the shifts in emphasis and the rate of change in education since 1988 have been unprecedented. The previous Government recognised that and put a five-year freeze on the national curriculum, but other changes have continued. There will soon be many new demands relating to key skills and post-16 education. There are rightly significant demands regarding literacy and numeracy. Soon, the precarious five-year freeze will be over. It is hardly surprising that teachers wonder what the future will bring.

From the beginning, it was recognised that school league tables would not take account of factors such as social and economic deprivation. Work is under way to provide some value added aspects in such data, but that is no easy task. It is a sad fact of human nature that the cruder forms of the tables will continue to gain most attention. For that reason, too, Ofsted should recognise the in loco parentis role played by teachers. Often teachers can play their most valuable part in bringing up worthwhile citizens in the most deprived areas. That sometimes overshadows more traditional teaching, although the league tables do not recognise it.

Perhaps if the Government see merit in the Bill—I am pleased to see the Minister for School Standards here—they will also think more generally about Ofsted. It is not unreasonable to demand accountability. At least Ofsted tries its best to take into account almost all aspects of a school's performance, but it must be time to review the entire Ofsted inspection system. It was introduced with all good intentions to improve standards in schools. Surely we must evaluate what has gone before and adjust our practices accordingly, as we demand of our teachers and learners.

Ofsted has become expensive. Surely some of the money could be better used in schools that we know to be under-resourced. It is an irony that Ofsted, which was designed partly as a mechanism to enforce accountability, is accountable to nobody. Surely that needs to be addressed.

Despite all the pressures and demands on teachers, the in loco parentis responsibility remains and grows more challenging. Society looks ever more towards schools to fulfil the role once played by parents. Responsibilities for social and moral development, for supporting law and order and even for helping with local disputes that originate way beyond the school gates, are being pushed up the school drive.

I have heard schools described as museums of moral standards. Perhaps we are unreasonable to expect schools to impose requirements of behaviour, spirituality, general conduct and work load that exist in few other areas of modern British life. However, such expectations exist in such a fierce atmosphere of accountability that teachers work in the knowledge that the slightest perceived error of judgment is likely to be heavily criticised. In some ways, that is the greatest pressure of all.

I continue to applaud the efforts and successes of the teachers and schools that I know well, particularly in Lichfield. Our schools manage wonderfully in demanding circumstances. They do so because of a genuine desire to do the best they can for the young people they teach.

I address the House at the end of the parliamentary year, so there is no chance of the Bill becoming law, but I believe that the sentiments that I have expressed have cross-party support. I know that my voice will be heard in the Department for Education and Employment, and I hope that Ministers will implement what I have said.

It is time to value all that our schools have to offer. It is time to reward success. It is time to put our schools into a position in which further success can be sustained. That cannot be achieved unless we think a little more carefully about the contrasting and increasing demands that are being made. It cannot be achieved unless we recognise all the good work done by our schools, including their in loco parentis or parenting role. That should be included in the Ofsted inspection and reflected in the resulting league tables. We need more common sense on the issue, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Michael Fabricant, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mrs. Ann Winterton, Mrs. Llin Golding, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Alan Keen, Mr. Eric Pickles, Mr. Christopher Fraser, Mrs. Eleanor Laing, Mr. Ronnie Fearn and Mr. Peter Luff.

EDUCATION (SCHOOLS PARENTING ROLE)

Mr. Michael Fabricant accordingly presented a Bill to recognise the in loco parentis role of schools through amendment of the Ofsted inspection procedures; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 November, and to be printed [Bill 227].

ESTIMATES DAY

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

ESTIMATES 1998–99

Class IV, Vote 1

Beef Industry

[*Relevant documents: Third report from the Agriculture Committee of Session 1997–98, on the UK Beef Industry, HC 474, and the Government's response thereto, HC 720; second report from the Welsh Affairs Committee of Session 1997–98, on the Present Crisis in the Welsh Livestock Industry, HC 447; The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Intervention Board departmental report 1998, Cm. 3904.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a further sum not exceeding £142,691,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Intervention Board—Executive Agency in giving effect in the United Kingdom to the agricultural support provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union; other services including BSE emergency measures; and administration.—[*Mr. Rooker.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following estimate: class IV, vote 2—

That a further sum not exceeding £389,128,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on operational expenditure, agencies and departmental administration including BSE related measures; promote food safety; take action against diseases with implications for human health; safeguard essential supplies in an emergency; promote action to alleviate flooding and coastal erosion; to protect the rural economy particularly in Less Favoured Areas; encourage action to reduce water and other pollution and by other measures to safeguard the aquatic environment including its fauna and flora; improve the attractiveness and bio-diversity of the rural environment; implement MAFF's CAP obligations efficiently and seek a more economically rational CAP while avoiding discrimination against UK businesses; create the conditions in which efficient and sustainable agriculture, fishing, and food industries can flourish; take action against animal and plant diseases and pests; encourage high animal welfare standards; provide specialist support services, allocate resources where they are most needed; manage and develop staff; undertake research and development; and provide for the expenditure of the Ministry's executive agencies.

5.10 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): We conduct this debate very much in the shadow of the comprehensive spending review, which at first blush seems to have had a relatively modest impact on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The target of reducing the incidence and costs of bovine spongiform encephalopathy may prove to be one of the least demanding facing any Department at present—and I congratulate the Minister of State on that. It also appears that an end to the calf processing aid scheme has been announced, to which we shall need to return later in the debate.

I emphasise that in no sense is this debate a Conservative debate, as some parts of the farming press have suggested. The debate is essentially on two Select Committee reports, and is very much a House of Commons occasion. I therefore hope that it will not become a debate on MAFF's chapter in the comprehensive spending review. Our most recent debate on common agricultural policy reform was overtaken by a wide range of other issues. The beef industry deserves a debate of its own on the Floor of the House.

The report of the Agriculture Committee, which forms the basis of the debate, perhaps deserves a place in "The Guinness Book of Records", as two of its major recommendations were implemented while it was at the printers. The Government's decisions not to impose the costs of new specified risk material controls and the start-up and first-year running costs of the British cattle movement service were both very welcome and reflected the report's recommendations. However, I hope that the Minister of State will accept that the Government's description of those decisions as

"a total saving to the industry of around £70 million"

is a tad disingenuous. In fact, the Government's decision was, very rightly, not to impose £70 million of new costs on the industry.

I hope that the debate will be a forward-looking occasion—not an opportunity to allocate blame, but an occasion on which we look for solutions. Perhaps our colleagues on the Welsh Affairs Committee will want to say something about supermarkets. The long-awaited report from Tesco is now out. Many of us might not be totally convinced by it, but I shall leave others to dissect it if they choose. I hope specifically that the debate will not be about the history of BSE. The Phillips inquiry will report at about this time next year. For today's debate, let us start from where we are and not spend too much time worrying about how we got there.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Why not?

Mr. Luff: Farmers are genuinely worried and do not want us to play party political games with their future; that is why not. We must look to the future. The Labour party and other parties might want to make the most of the Phillips inquiry in a year's time, but for today let us please concentrate on the real problems facing British farmers.

Farming is in an exceptionally serious state, and our words will be carefully scrutinised by those outside the House. The debate may be about the beef industry, but its problems are very similar to those in the rest of British agriculture. There are many misunderstandings about farmers and farming, which often flow from the misunderstanding between town and country. A Yorkshire farmer was recently prosecuted for depositing slurry on the highway under section 161 of the Highways Act 1980. A motorist skidded on the cowpat and prosecuted the farmer. I am glad to say that, in its wisdom, the court dismissed the case, judging the cow, not the farmer, responsible for depositing the load. I sincerely hope that this debate will reveal a similarly enlightened attitude to the problems of British farming.

Perhaps unusually, this is genuinely an estimates day debate. Even though I have already said that I do not think that we should debate the history of BSE, it is worth offering a pat on the back—

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): A cowpat?

Mr. Luff: MAFF deserves not a cowpat, as my hon. Friend says, but a plain pat on the back for last week's National Audit Office report, "BSE: the cost of a crisis". Whatever the rights and wrongs of the previous Government's policy, the NAO endorsed the quality of its implementation. The House's thanks must go to the officials for that. The report acknowledges the cost to the taxpayer, but on the implementation of the over-30-months scheme, for example, it says that the NAO regards

"these as impressive results in the circumstances".

The report reminds us all:

"The pressure on the Ministry and the Intervention Board at that time to respond quickly and effectively to this catastrophe was intense. There was no precedent for this situation which struck uncertainty and fear into thousands of farmers, hundreds of companies in the trade, and millions of consumers."

Against that background, a small team of officials did an outstanding job. The House should feel able to say, "Well done," to a small Ministry that achieved much against the odds but normally gets more than its share of brickbats.

This debate is about the future, but first I should like to describe some background. The National Farmers Union tells us that average producer prices of beef in pence per kilogram have fallen from 105.5p in 1996 to 89p today. The overall fall in farming incomes last year was about 47 per cent. I am glad to say that beef consumption in the United Kingdom is up by about 7 per cent. on this time last year, but without crucial export markets and given high levels of imports, producers still face great problems.

This debate is not just about farmers' problems. The beef industry is part of a much wider rural and, indeed, urban economy. Beef farmers play a vital part in the social life and the environment of much of the UK. Biodiversity, for example, in less-favoured areas, depends on traditional grazing patterns. An independent consultants' report to the Government on the economic impact of BSE on the UK economy in March said:

"In 1995, the beef industry with final sales of £4,100 million created gross added value in the UK economy of around £3,200 million. This represented 0.5 per cent. of the UK's gross domestic product and supported 130,000 jobs."

It is a substantial industry by any standards.

Last year, in my county of—as it was then—Hereford and Worcester, the chamber of commerce, the county council, the Rural Development Commission and others demonstrated that 550 companies were ancillary to the beef industry. They were in agricultural services, meat wholesaling, slaughtering, agricultural engineering, road haulage, veterinary surgery and so on. A total of 5,200 jobs depended on those companies. At that time, as a result of beef farmers' problems, 56 per cent. of them had lost turnover. Total net losses to the county economy alone were as high as £40 million. At its worst, 260 jobs were lost. Therefore, the debate is about much more than farming.

Beef consumption may have recovered in the UK, but I hope that it is of some concern to the House to learn that, even now, according to the Meat and Livestock Commission, 80 British local education authorities are still banning beef altogether from school meals. Those LEAs include some predictable names, such as Islington and Greenwich. They include rural counties where beef production is important, such as Derbyshire and Oxfordshire. They include major cities, such as Birmingham, which is on the doorstep of both the Minister of State's constituency and mine. They include four Welsh authorities, including Swansea. Apparently, they even include otherwise sensible authorities, such as Wandsworth and Kensington and Chelsea. There is no party political point scoring to be had here.

There is no more justification for continuing those bans than the export ban. British beef is now unequivocally the safest in the world. As a memorable sign along the M5 in Worcestershire proclaimed last week,

"British beef is safer than sex."

[Laughter.] I would not recommend both at the same time, however.

There is some concern in the farming community about the fact that the Government, understandably, often represent sums paid out in the wake of the BSE crisis as subsidy to farming. Much of that money is a means of protecting public health as much as protecting farming.

I think of Kites' Nest organic beef farm in my constituency, where not a single beast has contracted or could contract BSE. Yet it is obliged to sell its cull cattle into the over-30-months scheme and collect the so-called subsidy. The farm would be doing a lot better if customers could again buy its splendid organic beefburgers made from the same cull cows. The OTMS payments to that farm and to the many others totally free from BSE are not a subsidy to farming at all—on the contrary, they cost farms money—and the House should be clear about that.

Equally, we should be clear about the fact that farmers, my Committee, the Government, the House—everyone, in fact—would prefer agriculture to be moving towards a truly commercial marketplace. Farmers would rather farm food than subsidy. However, as our report said:

"Given the impact"

of the strength of sterling

"on subsidies and prices, as well as the continuing problems of the BSE crisis, we think that farmers are right to expect the Government to treat them sympathetically."

We also said:

"the crisis in the beef industry demands a response from the Government which may be in conflict with what would be desirable for the industry in the long-term."

The overwhelming message from my farmers—and, I expect, from the farmers represented by most other hon. Members—is "Lift the export ban and reduce the level of sterling." But there are also many important specific issues to which the Government will have to give responses in the next few months.

One concern that the Committee highlighted is the failure of successive Governments to pay enough attention to relative competitiveness, and the actions that Government can take in that regard. A Meat and Livestock Commission report on the competitive position of the red meat industry in Great Britain in relation to the

[Mr. Luff]

collection, processing and disposal of animal by-products showed an extra £129 million in overall costs compared to the costs of our major EU competitors.

For beef, the total cost was £58 million—£26.73 per animal per year, or 9.2p per kilogram deadweight. That is just one relative cost. Animal welfare and environmental costs come on top, and so do Government charges. The Committee said:

"Many of the extra costs faced by the UK industry are not shared by their EU competitors. The Government's inability to supply more than sketchy information on the arrangements made in other Member States, specifically on charges for SRM controls and cattle traceability systems leads us to the conclusion that Ministers cannot have been able to assess the effects on the UK industry's competitiveness of their decisions in respect of those matters. This is of serious concern to us".

In their response to our report, the Government supplied some information on the situation in other EU countries, but it could reasonably be described as still sketchy. Interestingly, Germany was entirely omitted from the list.

I shall now make some other brief specific points, to which I am sure the House will appreciate as many responses from the Minister as possible. There was much gratitude in the farming industry for what the Minister of Agriculture did in December last year, but now, with the coming of the euro, new proposals are on the table from the Commission for the future of agrimonetary payments.

How will the Government respond to those? What will be their attitude to further requests from the farming industry in general, and the beef industry in particular, for more agri-monetary compensation payments this year? As our report said, in the context of the most welcome 22 December support package:

"Should circumstances be the same at this time next year, the Government should be sympathetic to the plight of the industry."

On present trends, it looks as if circumstances will be very similar then, so I hope that the Minister will keep his options open on that issue.

Clearly, the over-30-months scheme should be phased out at some stage. There is no logic in continuing it unamended after 1 February 1999, and it seems to be conspicuous by its absence from the comprehensive spending review. The Government will have to start thinking quite urgently about how a market can be re-established for older cattle, so that we can begin the phasing out of the over-30-months scheme. Beef from cattle older than 30 months is perfectly safe, but I believe that there may be some consumer resistance to that idea. Work needs to be done now, to enable the phasing out to take place.

The Government have recently been consulting on the future of the calf processing aid scheme. It has played an important role in removing surplus male, mainly dairy, calves from the market, but it is an intrinsically unpleasant scheme, and the Committee said that public support for it would probably wane. I think that we would all wish it to go as soon as possible, but probably not quite yet. There must still be a mechanism to keep the beef market in balance at least until the export markets reopen, and probably longer.

The farmers to whom I have spoken would prefer to keep the whole scheme until market conditions are much more normal. However, that may not be an option for the Minister. A much less acceptable alternative, but an alternative none the less, would be to ensure that all beef calves do not go into the scheme. The risk is that male dairy calves, reared and fattened on cheap cereal, could flood the market in 18 months' to two years' time, with serious consequences for beef farmers.

The comprehensive spending review appears to have trailed the abolition of the calf processing aid scheme. It has a £52 million full-year cost, entirely EU-funded; because of the Fontainebleau adjustment, that probably costs MAFF about £37 million. I shall be interested to hear what the Minister says about that scheme.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): Before my hon. Friend leaves the CPAS, will he extend his comments to embrace the point made by the Select Committee—that it was an indirect means whereby the United Kingdom was bearing the brunt of the restructuring of the European beef industry?

Mr. Luff: Indeed, that is a point to which I wish to return later. It was a matter of considerable concern to the Committee that there seemed to be some kind of agenda in play among our colleagues on the mainland of Europe to ensure that we bore the brunt of that restructuring. Clearly, that is unacceptable. There is over-production throughout Europe, and Britain must not bear the whole burden.

The rendering industry took a bit of a knock in the recent report by London Economics for Tesco. Indeed, I believe that at least one renderer is considering legal action against one or other of those bodies for what was said about it. However, whatever the rights and wrongs of rendering, we cannot duck the fact that the renderers' products have either collapsed in value or lost their markets altogether. For tallow, according to a Meat and Livestock Commission report, there are some opportunities for renderers at £70 per tonne, whereas before the BSE crisis they were getting up to £400 per tonne for the same products. I think that it is fair to say that the Government dismissed our suggestion of additional aid for the rendering industry, but I am not sure that that was the right response, and I shall be interested to hear what the Minister says about it.

As for restructuring, what exactly is happening? The Committee expressed its reservations about the EU scheme, and I know that the beef industry would appreciate some clarification by the Minister today. We were sceptical about the applicability of the EU scheme in the UK context, and there are also concerns about how far it can help tenant farmers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) said, we are all concerned that the EU may be seeking to force the necessary restructuring of the Europewide beef industry on this country alone—perhaps as some kind of punishment for BSE. That remains intolerable and unacceptable, and I am sure that the Minister will resist it.

My Committee is currently considering rural development issues and the future of hill livestock compensatory allowances—a crucial issue in that debate. Alternatives to hill livestock rearing will not sustain many remoter rural economies, and traditional grazing patterns are crucial to the local environment. Again, some clue to the Minister's thinking in that area would be welcome.

Now I come to what is perhaps the most important issue. The success of the selective cull appears, after all, to be an important consideration for our partners in

Europe before they will move on from lifting the ban on Northern Irish beef to implementing the date-based export scheme.

Reports in this week's farming press suggest that Emma Bonino's consumer affairs directorate has concerns about the success or otherwise of the selective cull, and also wants all cattle bones classified as specified risk material. Mrs. Bonino also appears to be concerned about the effectiveness of our traceability systems. The muddled mailing from the British cattle movement service has probably impressed neither farmers nor the Commission.

None the less, I should be interested to know what the Minister's assessment is of the prospects for the implementation of the date-based export scheme. The best guess for the House now appears to be that it will not happen until early next year. Moreover, it is important to recognise that even then, there will not be a full lifting of the beef export ban, only of the ban on exports of beef from cattle under 30 months old. Exports of over-30-months beef will remain banned even then. Again, the Minister's clarification would be welcome.

The Committee noted that the Government considered expenditure on promotion to be a matter for the industry, but in the context of the beef export ban it said:

"This position may have to be modified when the export ban is lifted to assist the UK beef industry in the difficult task of regaining sales in its previous export markets outside the EU."

I feel, as does the Committee, that when that time eventually comes, the Government will have to assist in the drive to recover lost markets. After all the money that has been poured into the beef industry in recent years, to fail to do so would be to spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar. The Government appear to have found £2 million for Northern Irish beef following the lifting of that ban, so something pro rata for the rest of the United Kingdom would seem appropriate. A precedent appears to have been set.

My final specific point is something to which I shall not devote time, because it is too complex—the reform of the beef regime within the common agricultural policy. The Minister may be able to give us a clue as to how things are developing there.

In conclusion, the four big themes are: ending the beef export ban; improving the industry's competitiveness; the problems caused by the strength of sterling; and the need for a clear Government strategy for the industry. That is not a criticism of this Government—the Select Committee was careful to say that successive Governments had failed in that task. Even within the constraints of the common agricultural policy and the World Trade Organisation, the Government can set a course for our beef industry. If, as they attempt to do so, the Government think about those four themes in all that they do, they will not go far wrong.

As we say in our report,

"once the industry is through its present serious difficulties, its future will be bright. We wish to see a prosperous and thriving UK beef industry, and we have confidence in the resolve of the industry to re-establish itself as a leading force in global markets."

We said that the industry's economic revival should be built on the foundations of quality, safety, traceability, our comparative advantage as a nation of beef production, an end to market-based support mechanisms and the industry's own desire to set high animal welfare standards. We also spoke of the need for Government assistance for industry initiatives to improve marketing and management skills in the farming community—something to which the Select Committee attaches special importance.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Increasingly, the Commission comes up with schemes that involve more national discretion. Did the Committee address the question whether the Government would apply for that discretion, and, if they did not, whether other competing countries that did apply, such as France and Germany, would then be competing in our market from a lower cost base?

Mr. Luff: We did not do that in the context of the beef industry report, but it is a matter that we are keeping under constant review in our discussions about the future of the CAP reform and Agenda 2000. Many farmers are expressing precisely the concern raised by my hon. Friend, so it is important for the House to bear that in mind.

There are grounds for long-term optimism in the beef industry, but for the short term it will be very difficult indeed. One local farming business in my constituency wrote to me last week:

"Our future as an industry looks bleak. Agriculture is standing on the edge of an abyss and if we are not thrown a life-line soon, it is only a matter of time before we all fall in and disappear forever."

However, Don Curry, chairman of the Meat and Livestock Commission, said, when introducing a report which predicts 2.4 per cent. annual growth in world meat consumption:

"all is not doom and gloom. There are long-term opportunities, but there are challenges too, and the British industry needs to improve competitiveness, particularly in relation to other EU countries."

The opportunities are there, and the Select Committee believes that the Government can play their part in seeing the beef industry through to the time when it can take advantage of them.

5.32 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): When I meet beef farmers in the Forest of Dean, they tell me that they are just holding on. They have had a terrible time as the cash value of a finished steer or heifer has dropped 30 per cent. from 1995 values. They put the situation down to three factors—the high value of sterling, the dominance of the multiple retailers and the devastating effects of BSE leading to the beef ban and the loss of their markets and consumer confidence.

My beef farmers are a realistic lot. They tell me that, although Government policy has played a part in the strengthening of sterling, they recognise that European monetary union is a major pressure in that process, and they rather begrudgingly accept that, for the time being, the strong pound is a fact of life. However, they expect the Government to behave with the utmost sympathy during this difficult time—a point made during the Select Committee's inquiry, which was published earlier this year.

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, said that we do not want to go over history, but history is important if we are to understand the present. My beef farmers know that the single biggest factor in the present situation has been the BSE crisis; they are having to cope with the terrible legacy of it.

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

We have heard that the Conservative party has set up a shadow Cabinet sub-committee on the countryside and rural affairs. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said that the

"Committee's priority would be to act as whistleblowers on Government policy which would be harmful to the rural economy or way of life."

The Government do not need such a committee to act as whistleblowers; the National Audit Office does the job much better in its report, "BSE, The Cost of a Crisis", published on 8 July.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) *rose—*

Mrs. Organ: I am afraid that I cannot give way, as I want to make progress and I have only limited time.

The NAO has said that the BSE crisis has been the single most expensive peacetime catastrophe. The cost is set to rise to more than £4 billion before 2000, the biggest part of the bill will be compensation to farmers, and average compensation for younger animals being slaughtered is £1,400.

The previous Government's handling of the whole beef saga is a tale of mismanagement and ineptitude—such as the lack of response to the Select Committee's recommendation in March 1994 that they should ban offal and brain substances in the food chain. That recommendation was turned down. The NAO report points out that, in their panic after March 1996, the previous Government did not act in the best interests of taxpayers but threw money indiscriminately at the problem.

The report questions some of the financial deals struck with farmers, slaughterers and renderers. There was no proper competitive tendering—slaughter fees were simply set at £87.50 per animal in May 1996, even though there was over-capacity in that sector. In reality, the cost was closer to between £39 and £51 per animal, as Coopers and Lybrand found in an open book examination in July 1996. The fee was not reduced to £41 until late August 1996, and competitive fees did not come in until this Government put them in place in July 1997.

Mr. Hunter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Organ: I hope to make progress. There is very little time, and I would like other hon. Members to be able to get into the debate.

The NAO report states that the £670 million compensation paid to farmers in 1996–97 was too generous for beef animals. That financial mismanagement of the affair is an example of how the whole situation was handled. In addition, the lack of unity in the Conservative party on European affairs did not help. They continually call on us to claim agrimoney compensation that they know is not available. It is interesting that the Conservative party, over the period of the crisis, did not ask for it or get it. However, we have secured £85 million compensation, which we announced as part of an aid package in December 1997, using up almost all the aid that we can apply for.

The decline in farm incomes and the depression in the beef industry did not appear after 1 May 1997. We have had to pick up the pieces of the Tory legacy. We have introduced a raft of measures to help the beef sector—additional hygiene measures to restore confidence; the introduction, on time, of the cattle traceability system and paying for the set-up and first year running costs; the launching of the beef labelling scheme, supporting the assured beef meat initiative to the tune of £1.8 million; and publishing hygiene assessment scores from UK slaughterhouses.

I note that my two local slaughterhouses, Ensors at Cinderford and Lyes at Minsterworth, have excellent scores in this month's enforcement report. This Government, with other European Union states, the Parliament and the Commission, have worked tirelessly to lift the beef ban, with the first exports of Northern Ireland beef being reported in last week's *Farmers Weekly*.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Organ: I will not, as I have told other hon. Members. I want to make progress so that other hon. Members can speak.

We are pressing for a wider lifting of the ban under the date-based export scheme. The proposal to permit the export of beef from cattle born after 1 August 1996 has now been referred to the Standing Veterinary Committee. We will shortly press in the Council of Ministers for the decision to be made on a scientific basis alone.

As the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire said, the Government have agreed to almost all the recommendations in the Select Committee report. We have already put many of them into place. As the hon. Gentleman said, two of them were put in place while the report was being printed.

Another factor that beef farmers in the Forest of Dean claim is responsible for poor farmgate beef prices is the dominance of the retail multiples, which control 70 per cent. of retail fresh meat sales. Farmers know that their industry is cyclical. All livestock producers know that markets go up and markets come down. Sometimes it is good for producers, sometimes it is good for retailers, but since the mid-1980s farmers have faced increased pressure from retail concentration in the beef supply chain and hence surprisingly low returns.

Before the mid-1980s, farmers would grumble about the butchers making money, but they did feel that it was a matter of "a season for us, the next season for the butchers". That has gone; the game has now changed. Even during the present difficult situation, retailers have been able to hold their margins. The Meat and Livestock Commission states:

"Supermarkets have continued to make steady margins on beef sales over the past two to three years while returns for producers have slumped."

That was the commission's conclusion in response to the Welsh Affairs Committee in March, and it remains the case.

In response to the London Economics report "The Supply Chain for Beef and Lamb"—commissioned by Tesco—Don Curry responded by saying:

"it is clear the multiple sector has not shared the reduction in industry returns in the past two years."

That is bad news for producers and consumers, but not for the retail giants.

The London Economics report has an element of controversy about it, the second draft being a revision of the first; the comment that beef farmers had been inefficient and complacent operators immediately before the BSE crisis was withdrawn. The National Beef Association said that the report was not fair, factual or independent, as it was commissioned by Tesco.

The final report proved that supermarkets have not been making huge profits from the sale of beef or lamb. They have not been making excess profits after BSE, because their margins have been eroded due to the post-BSE added costs and the specified risk material controls, with the gap between producer returns and retails rising by 23p per kilo since March 1996 and the costs due to BSE increasing by as much as 27p per kilo. The incurred costs of the processing and market chain have not led to increased profits for retailers.

I should have thought that that argument was undermined by the obvious fact that slaughterhouses are paying less for cattle. Tesco is selling beef as a loss leader for other, more profitable, foodstuffs. It states that beef was the biggest loss maker in its entire meat category in 1997–98.

Whatever the report says, the multiple retailers are using their ever more powerful grip on the market and are abusing their buying power—and farmers are suffering as a consequence. That pressure—particularly when other supermarkets are buying meat on price alone from overseas processors who do not face the same regulations and have little regard to quality or concern about how the animal is reared—makes it difficult for our domestic producers to compete, even with their high quality, safety and hygiene regulations and some of the best animal welfare standards in the world. Labelling should inform the consumer of all that.

It is not all doom and gloom, as the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire stated. Consumption is up and confidence is being restored. Beef is back on the menu in many schools. British beef is back in McDonald's hamburgers. There has been a 7 per cent. increase in home beef in the first quarter of 1998 over 1997. My local National Farmers Union representative, Robert Purdey, tells me that there has been a small increase in the beef price of late and that feed costs have gone down. Locally in the Forest of Dean, the small organic beef sector is faring extremely well, aided by the marketing strategy of the Forest of Dean food directory. I commend that document to the House.

Beef producers receive more than £500 million each year in normal beef subsidy. It is a difficult time, and producers are facing problems, but there are opportunities in the long and short term. It is predicted that there will be a 2.4 per cent. growth in world meat consumption in the next seven years.

The Meat and Livestock Commission has close contacts with Europe and, although it will take time, many caterers and retailers there want our beef. I look to the Minister to assist in promoting beef when the European market is open. If farmers come together, they should be able to put pressure on the retail markets. With assistance from the Government, we should be able to give the consumers what they want—quality and food safety, and good British beef that can be delivered competitively.

5.43 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): In following the well-informed speech made by the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ)—and the excellent opening speech by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Select Committee—I start by saying that I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me for reflecting that, at times, such was her clarity and authority that her speech sounded like a ministerial intervention in terms of the Government's response to the Select Committee report rather than a supportive contribution from the Government Back Benches. Those of us who have been in the House for a while remember another female politician who used the royal "we" in a similar fashion. Perhaps we were listening to a throwback to that a few moments ago.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire and his Committee colleagues on the report. I link his name to that of the Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones). That Committee has done some excellent work on the supermarket aspect.

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire was right to say that the debate takes place in the immediate context—perhaps one should say shadow—of the Chancellor's statement, which immediately preceded it. Being a quintessentially fair-minded person, and never one to jump to instant conclusions, the hon. Gentleman spoke of what he thought of as the modest implications for MAFF of the statement. Having had no more time than the hon. Gentleman to look at the figures, I suggest that that modesty could be slightly more ominous in due course. Food safety, correctly, is being hived off to an independent agency, but the mission statement of MAFF is changing profoundly alongside that. Coupled with some of the initial figures—which we will need to look at in greater detail—some alarm bells may yet sound in agricultural communities and the various section heads in MAFF.

I, too, wish to touch briefly on the export ban, on compensation payments and controls and on the continuing problem underlying so many of the present difficulties—the strength of sterling. All quarters in the House and all parts of the country have welcomed the progress on the lifting of the export ban for Northern Ireland. That is good news, but we need more progress on the date-based scheme, which, frankly, appears to be bogged down by political shenanigans in Brussels.

I was in Brussels speaking to officials a couple of weeks ago. There is no doubt that the Standing Veterinary Committee has postponed further inspection consideration, and is unlikely to consider the matter again in Brussels until September. By then, the GB database on animal movements should be up and running, and one expects that DG XXIV will want that linked into the scheme. Allied to that, the German elections will be imminent. It is easy to see that the Standing Veterinary Committee—and the political and Council decisions that may flow from it—may be subject to further political delay as a result of the German elections timetable.

Some advantage has been taken of those events in a way that has not been designed—I put it no more strongly than that—to bend over backwards to help British Ministers and the British Government in their genuine efforts.

[Mr. Charles Kennedy]

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire was right: we must look forward in this debate. In looking forward, however, the recent experience examined by the Committee gives some important pointers. At the time of the March 1996 export ban, the veal calf market collapsed overnight, affecting about 500,000 animals. The calf processing scheme was brought in to compensate those affected—mainly in the dairy sector—by the loss of their market. That had the additional benefit of reducing the number of cattle produced in the EU. However, that has proved to be yet another example of action taken domestically here which has helped to bail out people elsewhere in the EU without providing any great return, merit or benefit to us.

Any halting of the scheme would lead to disaster if the veal market was not properly restored to farmers who have been hit. Once the date-based scheme is established, over-30-months cattle should be able to re-enter the food chain after February next year. That will lead to a serious early glut in the beef market, and it will be important that the ancillary measures taken in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland in terms of advanced promotion are redoubled by the Department to ensure that we can take as early advantage as possible.

Mention of February next year leads me in passing to something we debated in the House ad nauseam, if not ad infinitum—probably both: the ban on beef in the bone—[HON. MEMBERS: "On the bone."]—on the bone. The Minister may feel that it is in his bones these days, he has had to defend it so often at the Dispatch Box. The Minister knows the views of Opposition parties and I shall not rehearse them here, but there is not much practical need for that. I am not accepting the need for it here and now, but there will not be much further particular need for that beyond the date itself. That seemed to be the implication of the interview given recently by the Minister of Agriculture to the *Financial Times*.

I notice that the English court case against the restaurateur who sold beef on the bone has been rather quietly dropped. That being so, this is a further golden opportunity for the Government to save the public purse by not pursuing the Scottish case, which is now the only one outstanding and which has been referred by the Court of Session to Selkirk sheriff court. We know that we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, even given the stupidity and unnecessary nature of the policy, so why not just drop the Scottish case completely?

In 1997, a 47 per cent. drop in farm incomes was recorded by the NFU, showing suffering not only in the beef sector but across all sectors of the farming community. It can be seen most tellingly in the Welsh agriculture community, where beef and sheep rearing often occur on the same holding, subjecting farmers to a double whammy. That needs to be taken on board still further.

The London Economics report for Tesco has been mentioned. Even with the cloak of parliamentary privilege, no one wants to end up in the legal action that may yet be pursued as a result of all this but, as the hon. Member for Forest of Dean fairly said, that report revealed that whatever view one takes of the activities of supermarket chains—I incline towards the sceptical or critical view of their activities—the fall in farm gate prices is indisputable, not least because of the concentrated nature of the farming activity involved.

If the plug is pulled on someone's main or one of their two main activities, they are at the mercy of wider events and not in a position to exert much influence, but a Tesco or a Sainsbury that experiences a loss in one of its product ranges is always able to expect—indeed it encourages—the consumer to switch to other forms of produce and thus cross-subsidise product lines. The only group in the process, which includes the abattoir sector and the supermarket sector, that has been entirely exposed throughout since the imposition of the beef ban are the farmers, because they have no cushion and no alternative means of defence against the economic conditions that have been visited upon them.

The collapse in the beef market—BSE was central to it; for example, the Welsh market has fallen 28 per cent. since 1995—has been exacerbated by the strength of the pound and the unwillingness to access compensation funds available through the EU. Moreover, the additional regulatory controls imposed on our producers are not duplicated for competitors in other parts of the EU.

Those controls have been brought in to address understandable safety concerns. People will not object to them, but they have placed additional burdens at a time of massive disincentive and difficulty. The Meat and Livestock Commission has estimated that those costs come to some £27 per animal. Bearing in mind the prices achieved for the beasts involved, that is an horrendous further removal of any hope of profit—never mind viability—for many of the farmers involved.

The pressures have been eased, although not entirely alleviated, by the Government's removing the cost to the industry of Meat Hygiene Service inspections of abattoirs and paying the start-up costs of the computer traceability system and the first year running costs. At a time when the black art of spin doctoring is not commanding the most favourable headlines, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire made a fair point: saying that the postponement or cancellation of a cost which is not being borne at the moment represents a net saving to the overall economics of an industry is perhaps an example of spin doctoring meeting voodoo economics. The Government need to be slightly more cognisant of that in their approach.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The work is still being done. The taxpayer is paying for the work in the abattoirs. That is new. It is not as though the work is not being done. The Government's decision that the taxpayer should carry the burden amounts to a cost saving for the industry.

Mr. Kennedy: I do not buy that argument. That is similar to saying that the private finance initiative, where one removes the cost on the broadly based taxpaying public and concentrates it on one specific community or area for the project involved, is somehow a net saving. It is not. It is an additional cost on the people who are directly involved rather than spread more broadly across taxpayers. An important political principle is involved there, and a similar principle applies in this regard.

The present level of sterling means that UK farming is rendered uncompetitive, even in commodities that we are allowed to export. That has opened up domestic markets.

We should access the EU funds that have been established to deal with the situation, as other Governments in the EU have done. We need lower exchange rates and lower interest rates. The options open to the Government are time-limited, the next time limit being 31 July, because the aid has to be accessed within 12 months of green pound revaluation.

Although we are not having a particularly party political debate this afternoon, the Government should be more seized of the wider economic issues because they, like us, are, in principle, committed to sterling's entry into monetary union. In the United Kingdom, only the Conservative party is not. The Government should recognise that sterling's early entry into EMU would in all likelihood reduce the strength of sterling, from which agriculture, like manufacturing industry, is suffering. They have to take note of the fact—the Tories are isolated on this—that the leadership of the NFU is now expressing support for the principle of sterling's involvement in EMU, precisely because it can see the benefits that would accrue to its membership.

I conclude on a point that I have raised a couple of times during Agriculture questions, which the Ministry needs to consider further. Given the sums of money that, according to the National Audit Office report, have been paid out for, one hopes, the extraordinary occurrence of BSE and its associated costs, and the follow-through costs because of the collapse in agricultural incomes generally, the Ministry, in its attitude towards taxpayers' money, needs to think more carefully about the extent to which the dramatic rise in the number of farmers and their families having to take additional social security and income support, which, in most cases, has never been necessary before, is proving a bigger drain on the economy than is necessary, given the sums that could be saved by accessing EU funds and doing something about the strength of sterling.

At the other end, surely we need to consider early retirement schemes. If they are to be applied, they need to be much more sensitively structured than is currently the case at European level. As proposed, they would lead to further amalgamations and bigger individual farming units and would have a detrimental effect on tenant farmers, who would have to give up their property and their homes and find somewhere else to live. The matter is not sufficiently related to the needs and realities of UK agriculture.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kennedy: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am about to conclude.

I congratulate both Select Committees on their work. They have given extremely telling pointers for the beef sector in particular, for the role of supermarkets in general and for the future of viable, family-farmed UK products as a whole.

5.59 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): As a member of the Agriculture Select Committee, may I first pay tribute to the staff and particularly the Clerk, and to the Chairman, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who has shown fine leadership and a certain fairness. We can safely say that our Committee is one of the most productive in terms of its reports.

Farmers in Shropshire have had to endure horrendous hardship. They have shown strength of character in having come through such trying times, and they still deliver some of the finest-quality products, despite difficult financial circumstances.

The beef industry's aim must be to deliver world-class, safe, traceable beef, but it needs a level playing field within the European Union. We must restructure the industry if we are to deliver a real future for our farmers. There is no going back, so we must take account of the BSE crisis. Farmers must recognise that high animal welfare standards are an integral part of any restructuring, and must embrace any improvements to the local environment. If they can achieve those aims, we shall be able to have a thriving and, importantly, a sustainable beef industry.

There has undoubtedly been a long-term decline in beef sales. In its recent controversial report, the London School of Economics said that, on average, there was a 2.5 per cent. decline every year between 1985 and 1995. Clearly, before 1996, there was an over-supply of beef in the European Union, which amounted to some 116 per cent. of consumption needs. That is why restructuring the industry is absolutely vital.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is an over-supply of beef within the EU as a whole, but does he accept that the United Kingdom produces only some 70 per cent. of the beef eaten locally, so there is no over-supply in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Marsden: I note the hon. Gentleman's comment, but many farmers have suffered in the short term. Although they have great potential to meet requirements, there is still an over-supply. Once the European beef ban has been lifted, there will be enormous potential. I agree with the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire that the European market can allow for an expansion of beef exports and hence an expansion of beef production, but the figures do not support the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Keetch: Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) that political constraints are stopping the lifting of the beef ban? Does he genuinely believe that the farmers of Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire will see the beef ban lifted before the German general election in September? That is what is stopping the lifting of the beef ban. Should not the Government press for the beef ban to be lifted on scientific grounds, in line with the Florence criteria, rather than simply wait for the results of the German general election?

Mr. Marsden: That is precisely what the Government are doing, and they have made great headway. The first stage has already occurred in Northern Ireland and great steps have been made in terms of the cattle tracing system and the date-based export scheme. Those great strides were not made under the previous Administration. The Government's success has a lot to do with how

[Mr. Marsden]

welcome Britain is within Europe: we are now given a fair hearing, whereas under the previous Administration we were not.

I agree that the strength of sterling has caused serious problems for exporters in terms of compensation rates. I also agree that the price of beef has fallen. In 1995, the price was 244.4p per kilo and, by the end of 1997, it had fallen to 182.4p per kilo. We must remember that, in the two previous years, it fell by 30 per cent., so the origins of the substantial fall, which has translated into a substantial fall in farming incomes, go back many years before the Labour Government came to office.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Marsden: I should like to make a little more headway.

I shall sum up some of the Government's actions to date. They have achieved maximum application of EU agrimonetary compensation for the beef industry. They have made progress on lifting the beef ban, which is critical. As other hon. Members have said, that is the first priority. The cattle tracing scheme is progressing well and, despite a slight hiccup in setting up that impressive system, which is clearly leading Europe and, arguably, the world, the system will shortly be implemented. The date-based export scheme is proceeding well, as is the quality assurance scheme.

As a former quality manager, I have found that the quality assurance scheme works well, and will be important when it comes to labelling British beef abroad. Once British beef is labelled and allowed to be sold abroad, there may be problems. By guaranteeing our product in the first place, we shall quickly win over consumers abroad.

The Government are taking a partnership approach. They have made good progress, but farmers must realise that change will come in great abundance.

Mr. Cash: I invite the hon. Gentleman to cross the border from Shropshire to my constituency in Staffordshire and chat to some of the farmers there. I spoke to them only last weekend, and they certainly do not share the views that he has just expressed. Interest rate rises, not to mention the ban on beef on the bone, have brought disaster to rural communities. I live in Shropshire, so I also hear what the hon. Gentleman hears in his surgeries.

Mr. Marsden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, which show that the Conservative party is split from top to bottom on Europe. Farmers have been hurt in the past, but the blame lies fairly and squarely with the previous Administration. Farmers are now far more hopeful of having the beef ban in Europe lifted than they were 12 or 13 months ago.

There are some good practices around in the farming industry. Although the industry now offers high-quality products, it must continue to improve its farming techniques and to raise animal welfare standards. I acknowledge that our farming industry leads the way but, to stay ahead of the game, it must continue to improve.

I press the Government at every opportunity to create a Ministry for rural affairs, which would alleviate some of the problems of lack of investment in certain rural areas. I trust that, as the Government refocus the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, they will look actively at implementing my suggestion. I share the Select Committee's distaste for the calf processing aid scheme, and the concerns of hon. Members that Britain is taking on far too much in respect of the CPAS and Europe is not implementing its fair share.

Talking to farmers day in, day out, I still find that they would not want subsidies if they had a level playing field. I urge the Government to move slowly but clearly, to hold their vision of where agriculture will be in the 21st century and to ensure that we phase out support schemes, but at such a pace that farmers can cope. Quality assurance schemes are working well, and we must have better dialogue between the ministerial team, Parliament and rural communities, which perhaps should be listened to and understood better than they have been. The sharing of best practices is a way forward, because some farms can clearly produce their produce far better than others—we must learn from each other.

Conservative Members called for vast investment in farming communities, but where would that money come from? That is the central question; it is easy to call for extra funds in opposition, but, if they are serious, which hospitals and schools would they cut and where would they find the money?

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Marsden: I am wrapping up my comments, and I should like to finish on this point, because it is the central problem facing the Opposition.

6.11 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I welcome this timely debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, on its fine report. It is a bit of a disappointment that it has taken the report to prompt such a debate in the House, and many of us are disappointed by the scant regard given by the Government to the beef industry over a number of years. *[Interruption.]* It is indeed a year and a half, which technically counts as years.

The Government have given scant regard to the beef industry during their time in power. The debate is the third on the subject, and all have been very brief. Equally, this is the third debate in which the Minister of Agriculture has failed to appear. It may be said that it is not his role to answer such a debate, but he failed to turn up when we discussed the beef on the bone ban. We discovered him in the Smoking Room, with a large glass of brandy and a cigar in hand, while the biggest crisis to face British beef farmers for many years was being debated in the House. It would have been nice if he had shown good grace and turned up to listen to what we were saying about beef farming.

Wherever I go in the farming industry, there is a marked shortage of Labour appearances, for example at agricultural shows. I was at the Bath and West show a couple of weeks ago, and seven Conservative Members

attended. I understand that, far from any Minister turning up, invitations to Ministers' offices were not so much as answered. That is the experience at agricultural shows up and down the land. At the royal show last week, four Ministers turned up—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is limited time for the debate, and many hon. Members want to speak. I recommend to the hon. Gentleman that he stick closely to the subject at hand.

Mr. Gray: I shall indeed do so, and I am grateful for your correction, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Government seem to have scant regard for the deep crisis facing our beef farmers, so I thought it reasonable to make the point that Ministers are not turning up to agricultural shows to find out what beef farmers have to say. In contrast, my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) came to Chippenham livestock market in my constituency and spent three hours not with managers or the National Farmers Union, but on the floor of the market, talking to beef farmers and finding out what they had to say.

I would challenge the Minister, if he were listening rather than chattering, to let me know how many livestock markets he has visited this year, and how many livestock farmers he has spoken to. Perhaps his parliamentary private secretary will let him know that I asked the Minister that question, because he is plainly not listening. If he took the trouble to meet beef farmers in the way that my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde has done, he would come across things such as the headline in our local paper this morning: "Profits Alert As Farmers Hit Meltdown". As we all know, 47 per cent. were affected last year.

The report in the *Western Daily Press* last Friday suggests that beef farmers face an 88 per cent. cut in their incomes in the year ahead. The *Western Daily Press* analyst refers to a 66 per cent. reduction in the number of beef farmers in the west country. That is not a problem or a crisis; it is a catastrophe.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): If the hon. Gentleman read the article to the end, he would see that it says that things are looking much better for those farmers who will stay in beef.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is right: 66 per cent. of west country farmers will go out of beef, so things will be better for the 34 per cent. who are left. For the 66 per cent. of farmers in my constituency who will be out of beef within two years, that is a tragedy, and the Government should be deeply ashamed of it. It is also a tragedy for small family farmers, who are so well represented in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in mine.

The hon. Gentleman is right in that huge agribusinesses with huge acreages and huge numbers of cows may be all right but, according to the article in the *Western Daily Press*, small family farmers such as those in my constituency, who have been laying off their help and who are now running their farms themselves, will be out of business. Such farmers in his constituency will also be out of business, and I am surprised that he takes such a light-hearted attitude to that approaching family tragedy.

In the context of the care given by the Government to rural life and beef farming life in particular, it was interesting that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden), to whose careful speech I pay tribute, referred to a Ministry for rural affairs, which was promised by the Minister for the Environment on the splendid occasion of the 1 March rally in London. He also promised a rural White Paper, but it has been discovered through recent parliamentary questions that I have tabled that the Government are backing off hard from the notion of such a Ministry.

When the Minister of Agriculture was due to address Action with Rural Communities in England recently, the original title of his speech was "Towards a Rural Affairs Ministry", but I understand that, under pressure from the Deputy Prime Minister, he changed the title and moved away from any reference to such a Ministry. I challenge the Minister of State to say whether the Minister for the Environment was accurate on 1 March when he said that the Government would be moving towards a Ministry for rural affairs, and whether the Minister of Agriculture changed the title of his speech to the ACRE conference last week.

Mr. Rooker: I gave the speech to the ACRE conference.

Mr. Gray: In that case, we can have it from the horse's mouth. I am delighted that the Minister has given us that information. Was the original title of the speech "Towards a Rural Affairs Ministry"? Was he forced, under pressure from the Deputy Prime Minister, to change the title to one that bore no relationship to that matter? I shall happily give way if he wants to say categorically that he never planned to make a speech with such a title. The Minister seems to be shaking his head—it is often hard to tell whether he is shaking his head or nodding it. I shall happily give way if he will tell us about the title of the speech to ACRE.

At the time of the 1 March rally, the Government promised a rural White Paper, which is important for our rural areas and our beef farmers. From answers to recent parliamentary questions, it appears that they are backing off from the notion of a rural White Paper and they have of course given up annual updates to "Rural England" and "This Common Inheritance".

I shall move rapidly on to the beef industry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, before you pick me up on my remarks, although I defend what I have said: these issues are of key importance, and if we face a 66 per cent. meltdown—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman has already started to dig himself into a hole, he should stop digging.

Mr. Gray: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Minister should address three issues. The first, about which we have heard a great deal, is the beef ban. When will it be lifted? We know that the five conditions in the Florence agreement were fulfilled many months ago and that the Government said that they would be listening carefully and working hard with their close friends in Europe to lift the ban. Here we are, 18 months or so after they came into power, and there is no sign of the ban being lifted for the mainland, although we all welcome the lifting of the ban—albeit partially—in Northern Ireland.

Incidentally, it would be interesting to hear from the Minister whether Northern Ireland beef processors will be allowed to export beef on the bone. I understand that,

[Mr. Gray]

currently, they will not be allowed to do so. That brings us to the second great issue: the ban on beef on the bone, which has had such damaging effects on consumers' interests. Will the Minister shortly turn around, admit that he made a mistake and overreacted to the report by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, and lift that absurd ban?

Another issue that preoccupied the beef farmers whom I met on the floor of Chippenham market last week was the over-30-months scheme. Will the Minister now consider whether the scheme still has a role to play? Will he consider whether beasts born after September 1996—particularly those with no signs of maternal transmission—can now be excluded? If so, with what will he replace the current arrangement?

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), who is no longer present, mentioned the calf processing aid scheme. It has been argued that the scheme has outlived its usefulness, and perhaps is producing some curious anomalies. I believe that, in some quarters, low-quality calves are being bred specifically for its purposes. If the Minister is considering doing away with the scheme, does he agree that that would have to occur when the export of live calves was reintroduced? If he acted before that, the results would be disastrous for beef farmers.

The Minister must also pay urgent attention to the Government's entire approach to the economy. There is no doubt that the strength of the pound is having appallingly deleterious effects on beef farmers. Even if the ban were lifted tomorrow, if the pound remained as strong as it is now, who is to say whether the strength of imports would continue? I suspect that beef farmers would find themselves in a position similar to the current position of milk producers who, no matter how much they produce, cannot export it because of the strength of the pound.

Moreover, strong interest rates—which, irrespective of whether the Government have given control of interest to the Bank of England, are the Government's fault—are bearing down especially heavily on beef farmers with mortgages. Most of the small family farmers in my constituency have mortgages, and, month by month, must find cash to repay them. When will the Government act to lower interest rates, and to safeguard the interests of those family farmers?

Urgent and decisive action is required if the Government are to address the real problems that have been outlined today. I invite the Minister to visit Chippenham livestock market on any Friday that he cares to mention, between 11 am and 2 pm—I know that the farmers will welcome him—and to hear first hand from my farming constituents how life has become increasingly difficult over the past 12 months.

I am very concerned about the report in the *Western Daily Press* that suggests that 66 per cent. of beef farmers in the west country will shortly go out of business, and that—in the words of its headline—the beef industry there faces "meltdown". I question whether the Government are as concerned as I am; I suspect that their interest lies with the consumer rather than the farmer. If, however, the Minister says that he is as concerned about family farmers as I am, will he visit my constituency? Will he visit the Chippenham markets? Will he go into the beef ring, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde did last Friday? Will he address the farmers? Will he tell them what he intends to do about the catastrophe that they face, and when the ban will be lifted? Will he tell them how concerned he is—not so much about consumers, but about the farmer?

6.23 pm

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I am grateful to Madam Speaker, and to the Chairman of the Agriculture Select Committee, for the opportunity to debate the Welsh Affairs Committee's report entitled "The Present Crisis in the Welsh Livestock Industry"—along with the very good report published by the Agriculture Committee.

Our inquiry was launched in response to the real concerns and problems of farmers in Wales. Welsh farmers were the first to take direct action—which was a sign of their deep frustration, given that they are basically conservative, with a small "c". They threw beef in the sea, and blockaded ports. Such action is not to be condoned, but it should be noted.

The Committee's inquiry resulted from a joint request by the National Farmers Union and the Farmers Union of Wales. We were happy to examine the problem, as we had been asked to do. We had a unique experience in the joint NFU-FUW evidence session. Given the animosity between the two unions in Wales, it is notable that they were able to make such a concise and eloquent case in describing their problems. The phrase "double whammy" was used earlier, but Wales faces a triple whammy: the green pound is affecting sheep prices, dairy prices and, of course, beef prices.

The evidence given by the unions suggested that there might be an element of profiteering among major supermarkets. Market and supermarket prices did not seem to relate. Supermarket prices had maintained their level over the past year and a half, while cattle market prices were plummeting.

The inquiry went from strength to strength. Every time we invited someone to give evidence, that evidence raised more questions than it answered. Eventually, we were asking for evidence from frozen-food producers, meat manufacturers, representatives of all the major supermarket chains in Wales, caterers, the Meat and Livestock Commission and, of course, the Welsh Office. It is fair to say that, on the whole, our conclusions on the beef problem coincide with those of the Agriculture Committee, but I want to concentrate on a subject that that Committee did not cover—supermarket profiteering, or the possibility of such profiteering, if only to enable supermarkets to defend themselves from the challenge.

Our Committee went as far up the food chain as we could. Our broad remit in Wales allowed us to stray into strange areas into which the Agriculture Committee may not have been able to stray. I am afraid, however, that we were still left with more questions than answers. I do not believe that the independent report commissioned by Tesco, which was mentioned earlier, is particularly convincing in its assumption that price spread broadly reflects increased abattoir costs. That assumption is probably not justified, and it certainly should not be tested.

Our conclusion that supermarkets are not profiteering but, on the other hand, not experiencing pain is probably correct; but the Government ought to ask the Office of

Fair Trading to intervene with a full-blown expert inquiry into the meat chain. That is essential if we are to secure the kind of expert evidence, for long-term purposes, that our Select Committee could not have secured without treading on too many other Committees' toes.

There is one example of the Committee's turning its gaze on a problem resulting directly in a good effect. I am sure—the figures seem to bear this out—that retailers, at least, are making real efforts to buy British beef. That must help.

I believe that the various Government measures that have been outlined so far—I am sure that the Minister will say more later—have already helped. Moreover, I am sure that the Government's recognition of the urgent need to lift the beef ban, and the welcome moves that have been made in that direction, bode well for the beef industry in the medium term.

6.28 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I hope that the Minister will not mind if I refer to two or three items in "Modern Public Services for Britain", on which the Chancellor made a statement today. They are quite important in the context of what we are discussing.

The document from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is, I assume, the Ministry's mission statement. It does not quite set the pulses racing, but it looks like a mission statement for an eventual department of rural affairs—although I suspect that we shall not have one as soon as we expected. Interestingly, this mission statement does not mention agriculture or fisheries at all; we have moved on to rather grand, vague terms such as "the rural community" and "the coastal community". The word "community" is clearly seeping into every part of parliamentary and political language. We ought to define what is meant by "community"; the term is used very loosely.

I also note, in the context of higher standards of consumer protection, that the charging of meat establishments is likely. I assume that that is what that paragraph means.

I hope that the Minister will clarify a matter that causes me concern and is central to the debate. The review states:

"the Government intends to end production-related support for hill farming and replace it with a scheme to maintain the environment and social fabric in the hills."

I am not sure what that means. It then says that that will depend on the progress made on Agenda 2000. I am not clear whether the Government are saying that they hope that Agenda 2000 will give rise to policies that will enable them to end production-related support. Depending on what replaces it, we may support the Government on that. We all want a system that liberates the farmer from dependence on production subsidies, and that assures the livelihoods of farmers by means that are perhaps more acceptable to the wider "community".

I want to know what is meant by that phrase, because it is important to us. Is it a unilateral policy that the Government will introduce, and does it depend on the outcome of Agenda 2000? The crucial question that will inevitably arise is, how will we ensure that measures implemented in the United Kingdom are at least analogous to those implemented elsewhere? The constant perception of farmers is that they receive less favourable treatment than that doled out to continental farmers.

The Government's belief that support in the hills should have no minima makes farmers circumstantially suspicious of the Government's attitude. My constituency in the Yorkshire dales is a less-favoured area, although a large part of it is a national park. Farmers in my area are bound to be preoccupied by those considerations.

Mr. Jack: Did my right hon. Friend find anything in the mission statement about the competitiveness of the beef industry?

Mr. Curry: The mission statement seemed to show the Department's desire to be seen as a Department that supports the consumer. I have no quarrel with that: I believe that it is right. If there are no consumers, there is no point having any producers. However, I would have liked to see that view balanced by remarks about the need to produce competitively for the marketplace, and to secure the social and environment fabric to which the document refers. As in all things political, there is a balance to be struck, and the Government should find out where it lies.

We should look to the future rather than to the past. It is now common wisdom that there will shortly be no intellectual or security justification for the continued existence of the 30-months scheme, because none of the animals coming into the food chain will have consumed contaminated produce. It is important to find a way of introducing that beef into the marketplace so that the consumer no longer believes that it is tainted beef. The danger is psychological. If we are to get people to eat beef—it is actually the better, slow, grass-reared beef: the older animal—we must ensure that we can sell it.

I see that Labour Members have been paged. Perhaps it is to tell them that they are now on a one-line Whip, or to give them some really useful information as opposed to the information that they are usually given via their pagers.

The ban on beef on the bone is important, because it also has a psychological effect. We are reaching the point at which it will be difficult to maintain that the ban is justified in terms of actuarial risk. The Government will probably be delighted to get rid of the ban, partly because they have dug themselves into a hole and partly because they will inevitably have no choice but to ban green-top milk. After all, the actuarial risk of green-top milk is a great deal higher than eating beef on the bone. It would be bizarre if one were to be banned and not the other, especially given that there is such a difference between England and Scotland. It will be interesting to see how No. 10 adjudicates on that problem.

We all want the export ban lifted, but we should not fool ourselves into believing that the act of removal of the ban, when it eventually comes, will represent a golden dawn for the agricultural industry. Those markets will be very hard to win back.

The continental consumer in the most important, high-value market is now conditioned to think of British beef as having a problem associated with it. There is real paranoia in some continental markets. No one on the continent will go out of his way to market British beef to the consumer. The new European labelling regulations, which will be in force compulsorily by 2000, will enable people to display a large notice saying, "Don't eat this beef, it's British", if that is how they want to play it.

[Mr. Curry]

There will not be a golden new dawn when the export markets are opened up. There will have to be tremendous political good will to enable that to happen, and British beef will have to be promoted so that people believe that they are getting a good deal.

The fundamental problem we face is the high value of sterling. The problem is not an accident of God: it is a matter of policy. Until the Government define Britain's relationship with the single currency and declare our intention to join it, the pound will remain a volatile currency at a rate that is too high.

Just six weeks ago, people were talking about the fact that the pound was declining, and that it was down to DM2.80 or DM2.70. We had marvellous visions of the pound declining, but it is now back up to the rates that everyone was complaining about before it started to decline. Sterling is set for a volatile career until the Government set out a pathway for Britain's relationship with the emerging single currency. That will affect all industries. Even if the export markets return, the price problem of getting into those markets will remain serious.

This problem does not affect only agriculture, but it does so in particular ways, because of the price determinations in agriculture. That is why the arrangements for the new agrimoney conditions will be important once we get past January 1999 and the single currency is, to all intents and purposes, in existence.

The Government are right to say that everything depends on the outcome of the negotiations on Agenda 2000. Agenda 2000 will not happen in a day. It will be subsumed in the World Trade Organisation talks, which is a more powerful, inescapable instrument of reform than enlargement of the European Union. We want a move away from production-related aid. The Government's position is that there should be compensation for the removal of that aid, which would become degressive. I do not think that that will do the trick.

I want a coherent menu of environmental aids—what the Government refer to as aids to support the social fabric—into which farmers can buy. We talk about the merits of environmentally sensitive areas and countryside stewardship schemes. It would be interesting to know what the costs would be of the generalisation of those schemes to start with, and to what extent those and the equivalent Welsh programmes represent a blueprint into which farmers can opt.

Hill farmers in my constituency and in the constituencies of those Labour Members who have a long-standing reputation for defending the legitimate interests of farmers in disadvantaged areas would be maintained. The consumer would get something that they would be willing to pay for, and we would get away from the confrontational perception of agriculture as a forced tax on everyone else. We need to spell that out soon, or we shall all blather about the conventional wisdom of moving towards environmental aid and no one will set out the mechanics of how this can become a practical, rather than an aspirational, objective.

It is crucial to begin this work, so that we know where we stand. This problem does not affect only upland farmers. I continue to believe that lowland livestock farmers are in the most serious difficulty of anyone in agriculture. Aid available to hill farmers is not available to them. They depend to some extent on what is happening in the hills, because of the traditional patterns of agriculture in the United Kingdom. They cannot compete with larger lowland farmers, which is the link in the chain that is closest to breaking point. We must face pressing new realities, and whether we like it or not the World Trade Organisation discussions are part and parcel of enlargement. They are inextricably linked.

Farmers will have to come to terms with environmental demands. The reaction against intensification underlies the argument about genetically modified food, which has become the lightning conductor for the wider concern of intensified agriculture. We must be careful that the legitimate concerns about the broader ecological impact of galloping technology do not render farmers unable to take advantage of cost-reducing technology that will help them to become more effective.

Another reality is consumer preference. Whatever our views on supermarkets and on whether they are profitable, those super-powers are in place, and the Orwellian world of competition between them will remain. Most citizens benefit from that, because it guarantees cheap food. Supermarkets are rather like global super-powers, in that we cannot pretend that they do not exist. The President of Mexico said, "Poor Mexico. So far from God, so close to the United States." The farmer might say, "Poor me. So far from the market, so close to Tesco."

Mr. Martyn Jones: The right hon. Gentleman speaks about competition between supermarkets. Is he unaware that their profits are about 7 per cent., whereas in other European countries supermarket profits are about 3.5 per cent.? They may not be delivering what he says they are delivering to our consumers.

Mr. Curry: That is true, but I do not think that continental supermarkets are more efficient than British ones. The hon. Gentleman may go to Calais more often than I do to collect beer, but in my experience British supermarkets are extremely efficient. That is shown by their expansion overseas. There is severe competition between them in the United Kingdom, and, if the margins were lower, the competition would become even more severe.

It will intensify, because Government planning policies, with which I agree because they were started by their predecessors, will make it more difficult to develop out of towns. That will result in more intensive competition for city centre sites, and an increase in pressure to sell more goods in city centres. Farmers do not have to love supermarkets, but they will have to live and work with them. Those are the new realities.

I hope that the Minister will address the issues that I have raised, because they flow from today's document. We could all speak about the incomes of our farmers and about the threat to traditional life in the uplands. However, there has been a structural change, and it is likely to be permanent. Prices will not recover to earlier levels. The market will have to operate in a different way, and that will put immense pressure on the industry. I should like to know how the Government intend, over the longer term of reform, to show some landing lights so that farmers will know where they are. That is probably agriculture's most reasonable expectation, and I have no doubt that the Minister would like to meet it.

6.42 pm

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate, because my constituency not only produces excellent beer—a product mentioned by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry)—but covers a large area of rural Staffordshire. The hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, said that we should not go over old ground, that the debate should start from today. That is impossible because, as some hon. Members have said, the issues go back to the BSE crisis, and many of them are intertwined.

Since before I was elected, I have been aware of the unprecedented difficulties of farmers. I was brought up on a farm, and I know that farmers have always had to cope with the day-to-day problems of our changeable climate, and with epidemics such as foot and mouth disease. However, nothing compares with their problems over the BSE crisis.

Time and again, the previous Government failed to tackle BSE. Their record was one of continual failure. The announcement on the fateful day of 20 March 1996 of the possible link between BSE and new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease caused great fear among farmers attending my local cattle market in Uttoxeter. However, the announcement did not clarify the situation or define the measures that would be needed to tackle the problem and protect the public. Those first few days of uncertainty exacerbated public concern about the safety of beef. Sadly, the previous Government went on to blame everyone but themselves for the crisis.

I welcome the report by the Select Committee on Agriculture, and above all I welcome the Government's response to it. The report shows that the Government have worked hard over the past 14 months to restore confidence in British beef, to find a way to lift the export ban and to ensure that British beef is as safe as any. I have had regular meetings with members of the National Farmers Union branches in Burton and Uttoxeter. Throughout the months since the election, they have expressed their concerns to me. Of course they continue to struggle because of the drop in farm gate prices resulting from the high value of the pound, and they are greatly concerned about the industry's future and the uncertainty.

My farmers appreciate the work of Ministers, especially in negotiation with our European partners. Burton NFU members asked me to pass their thanks to the Minister for his efforts in negotiations in the European Union, and they expressed their appreciation of the fact that the Government are to provide initial funding for the cattle traceability scheme and specified risk material controls.

Many issues that were raised with me and which are raised in the Select Committee report have been addressed by the Government. Of course there is still concern. Farmers in my constituency want a level playing field so that they are on a par with their European neighbours, and they do not want to carry the bulk of the cut in EU capacity. They remain concerned about the difference between wholesale and retail prices.

Uttoxeter NFU members conducted a study which showed a wholesale price of 90p a kg. That compared with £13.49 a kg in local supermarkets and £8.47 a kg for a similar cut from a family butcher. There is obviously a great difference between the price of meat from a local butcher and that from a supermarket, and an even greater difference between those prices and the wholesale price.

Farmers recognise the need for restructuring agriculture, and for a retirement scheme that will allow older farmers to retire with dignity and does not discriminate against women farmers. I am grateful to Ministers for their consultations on the European Union early retirement scheme. I hope that there is a satisfactory outcome.

There have been some traumatic years for agriculture, and there has been a knock-on effect on associated rural and urban industries. I welcome the Government's progress towards a complete lifting of the beef ban. I hope that our European colleagues will continue to work with Britain to ensure that British farmers have a level playing field, and that the lifting of the ban proceeds in accordance with scientific evidence and is not delayed because of any national self-interest. British farming has suffered much, but the quality of its products and the determination of the British farmer will win through. They will be supported by a Government who have worked steadily towards establishing safety and confidence in British beef.

6.48 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am sorry to start with a negative comment, but I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) about British farmers' faith in the halcyon new age and the marvellous new Government who have done so much for them. That view is certainly not shared by the farmers I meet as I travel around my constituency and more widely.

Of course, the crisis, which has been described by Labour Ministers as the worst crisis facing agriculture for a century, is not entirely a result of what has happened over the past 14 months, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. Of course BSE is a major factor in the problems facing the beef industry. That is implicit in any discussion about the industry.

I shall identify 10 key points that are a direct result of matters that have arisen over the past year. I shall try to cover those points a little more speedily than my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who took us on journey round the livestock markets and shows of Great Britain, or the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden), who took us on a journey from false logic to science fiction.

The first point is that farm incomes have fallen in the past year. There may be history to that, but in livestock terms, farm incomes have fallen by 62 per cent. in the past year. Throughout that year, the Government have claimed to be making great progress in their support for British beef.

Secondly, the strong pound is a direct result of Government monetary policy. The hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) tells us that that is something to do with the Government, but it is also the result of other factors over which the Government have no control. The truth, however, is that we have had two Budgets that have failed to stimulate savings and control consumer spending.

Interest rate authority has been passed to the Bank of England, which has used that authority to raise interest rates and maintain an artificially high pound. That has had a dramatic effect on the ability of our farmers, like all other manufacturers, to export. The high pound can be attributed only to the Government's failure to grasp the economic issues that surround it.

[Mr. John Hayes]

The third issue is that no serious attempt was made during the British presidency of the EU to deal with CAP reform. Despite the rhetoric, when Britain held the presidency CAP reform was relegated so far that it fell off the end of the list.

Fourthly, there has been no genuine progress on the lifting of the export ban. Granted, it has been lifted in the case of Northern Ireland, but that is pitiful after 14 months, when Northern Ireland never had a case of BSE anyway. Let us not forget that, when the current Government were in opposition, in 1996, they spoke about a firm timetable for an immediate lifting of the ban. The previous Conservative Government were criticised at the end of 1996 for not achieving a lifting of the ban.

At one of his first Question Times at that Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister promised us early progress. That was more than a year ago. Since then, there has been the paltry lifting of the ban in Northern Ireland. Welcome as that is, it is paltry when set against those high targets.

Mr. Gray: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hayes: Very briefly, as long as we are not going back to Chippenham.

Mr. Gray: I shall happily take my hon. Friend back to Chippenham some time, if he would like to come with me. He might learn a thing or two. Will he pay tribute to our erstwhile right hon. Friend, Lord Mayhew, who put in place the negotiations that led eventually to the lifting of the ban in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Hayes: Indeed, an excellent point. The truth is that the lifting of the ban in Northern Ireland would have happened—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: I shall give way, as the hon. Gentleman is such a fine chap.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman stated that there had been no cases of BSE in Northern Ireland. My information is that there have been 1,770 such cases. Would he care to correct that?

Mr. Hayes: I am delighted to bow to the hon. Gentleman's superior knowledge in these matters. He is an extraordinary authority on all affairs Northern Irish. I shall qualify my remark by saying that no one would have expected the Northern Ireland ban not to be lifted, regardless of Government policy and regardless of which party was in government. To herald that as a great sign of progress and the result of Government policy is a fallacy.

Mr. Rooker *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: No, with the greatest respect to the Minister, I shall not give way again. I said that I would make 10 points quickly, and I have made only four.

The fifth point is that there has been no firm guarantee of the necessary marketing support that will be required, once the ban has been lifted. As we have heard, enormous support will be required to assist with marketing, to re-establish confidence in the European marketplace, yet we have had no firm guarantee, in the form of facts and figures, from Government.

The sixth point is that there has been a fall in beef prices while the Government have been in office. That may have been part of a more general trend—I shall deal with restructuring in a moment—but there has been an explicit fall in beef prices, which I suppose brings us back to the issue of the strong pound.

The seventh point is the Government's failure to apply for agrimonetary compensation. When people speak of the Fontainebleau protocol, perhaps they should remember that its terms mean that the rebate that we were receiving, which is collected and used by the Treasury for all sorts of purposes, could well have been allocated to support agriculture during this difficult time, quite apart from the money that would have been claimed back under the European scheme. There is no real excuse for not claiming that.

Mr. David Taylor *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: No—no double whammy.

The eighth issue is the cut in hill livestock compensatory allowance. Given that 70 per cent. of beef farmers are in less favoured areas, they are particularly hard hit. As hon. Members will recall, the Select Committee report paid particular attention to the plight of tenant farmers. Tenant beef farmers are probably the worst affected of a badly affected industry, yet there have been cuts in support to them under the current regime at the Ministry of Agriculture.

The ninth point is beef on the bone, which is self-explanatory. I need say no more about a policy that was considered ludicrous by everyone, with the possible exception of the Minister and his cohorts.

The 10th [illegible] the style and approach of the team at MAFF, which has found so little favour with farmers and all those associated with the rural economy. For any Government to have stimulated a countryside rally, as this Government did after a few months in office, is a sad testament to the regard in which they are held in rural Britain.

In conclusion, I shall deal with the issue of restructuring. Much has been said about the over-production of beef in Europe. It is true that supply outstrips demand. The Select Committee examined the matter carefully. We are told piously by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham that we must restructure because of over-supply, but the restructuring must be Europe-wide.

At present, purely for market-driven reasons, Europe is obliging Britain to restructure—in other words, for beef producers to go out of business—so that European beef producers can continue to thrive, prosper and supply the market, such as it exists, across Europe. It is unfair and unreasonable for Great Britain to bear the brunt of European restructuring to bring supply in line with demand.

Mr. Paice: Does my hon. Friend agree that we may need to restructure and deal with the over-production of beef in Europe, but that an early retirement scheme to

reduce the number of producers will not necessarily lead to a reduction in production levels—indeed, it is possible that, with greater efficiency on larger-scale units, production could rise as a result of such restructuring?

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend is right. That matter was addressed by the Select Committee, which agreed that the Government had no strategic view of the British beef industry. They had no notional view on the number of producers or the amount of production. Those two things, as my hon. Friend says, are quite different, but it seems that the Government do not have a business plan for either.

The Select Committee—a cross-party group—acknowledged that there was no strong sense that the Government had a two, three or five-year plan for British beef. If we do not have a strategic long-term view—a business plan with notional figures, measurables and targets—for the number of producers and the amount of production, we are unlikely to instil confidence in our beef producers, let alone in the European markets that we need to open up again if that industry is to prosper.

I promised to be brief, but I have been a little longer than I intended because of some interesting and telling interventions, mainly from my hon. Friends. Specific questions need to be answered. The first is whether the Minister will answer the question about the relationship between the winding up of the over-30-months scheme and the explicit link to the data-based exports scheme. What about progress in Europe on those specific discussions? Will the Minister come clean about the noises being made currently, questioning the viability of our traceability package, which seem to signal continued prevarication and unreasonable response from Europe?

Will the Minister be explicit about the further, and in my judgment necessary, financial support that the Government will offer the beef industry, not for early retirement, but on a positive note to support the industry and to go out and sell the products in the wider world? What package will the Minister reveal to the House to support and market British beef—the best beef in the world—to the rest of the world?

7.1 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). He put me in mind of a certain type of constituent: when one acts on someone's behalf and has a minor success, one writes to them expecting perhaps a modicum of praise; one waits for the letter, and when it comes, it says, "Thank you very much for your help, but it should have been quicker. By the way, I have another problem." The hon. Gentleman gave grudging and scant praise—the word "praise" is probably an overstatement—for the substantial steps that the Government have taken to overcome this serious problem.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members serve with me on the Agriculture Committee, under what appears to be the almost sanctified chairmanship of the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). One of the witnesses who came before the Committee was my constituent Mr. Peter Hawes, of Shalford Green. He is a beef farmer and gave a moving account of the hard work and risk facing beef farmers and of their current financial plight. He carried the extra burden of being a tenant farmer. He said that the value of his herd had diminished by 50 per cent. over three years. That herd is his asset—his capital.

The freehold farmer is in a bad position, but not in as bad a position as the tenant farmer. I do not know whether hon. Members understand the agriculture property market, but it bears no relationship to the real value of the land. It goes up and down, presumably on a speculative basis, rather like the stock market. Neither of those amazing institutions relates to the commercial worth of the commodity. Tenant farmers cannot take advantage of the vagaries of the agricultural property market. If the price of a herd goes down, such farmers often come close to ruin. They may have borrowed from a bank on the security of the herd and, as the livestock market goes down, the bank sees the value of its security go down. Such people are the most hard pressed.

History has been referred to. The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire said that he did not want to discuss history at all, and my hon. Friends the Members for Burton (Mrs. Dean) and for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) wanted to deal with modern history. I do not want to go back to ancient times, but it would be helpful to consider beef over a longer time than just the past three or four years.

All the evidence shows that beef consumption in these islands has declined by about 50 per cent. since 1950. That is a substantial decrease, and it has taken place notwithstanding the advent of BSE and the introduction of the hamburger. Take hamburger consumption out of the equation and, by golly, there has been an absolute collapse in beef consumption since 1950.

There are several reasons for that and I need not detain the House by discussing them in detail; whatever policies are followed, however, the restoration of confidence in beef must be the prime consideration. People talk about over-production, but we could equally talk about under-consumption. The Government have been helpful in stimulating public awareness of the safety of British beef. They have committed sums of money and set up programmes that have helped in that way. We can never do enough.

My swan-song speech—if I may mix my animals—at Essex county council was about urging that council to restore beef to school menus. I am pleased to say—I do not take all the credit for this—that that has now happened, and I believe that other councils are moving in that direction. When we have proved beyond doubt that we have an entirely safe product for anybody to eat, it is absurd that it should remain banned in public institutions over which we have any influence. I am pleased that my county has taken a step in the right direction.

I want to enter a word of controversy on beef on the bone. Whatever the statistics relating to the risk—I believe that it is slight and that it might be easier to catch a flying fish in Rochdale than to be infected by eating beef on the bone—the point we must consider is confidence. The banning of beef on the bone was about confidence. It was one more step to show that we are prepared to do anything that is necessary to protect the public and to restore public faith in British beef. It may be a coincidence, but since the prohibition took effect last December, domestic consumption of beef has risen.

We all talk about our beef farmers as if we were proprietors in some way. The beef farmers I speak to in my division do not appear to be obsessed with beef on

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

the bone. They want the reopening of the export markets and they want understanding, which I believe they are getting from the Government, about their difficulties in the foreseeable future. When the BSE crisis ends, there is the danger of a glut in the market. That is why we should not wait to re-establish the domestic market. However, there is no point in maintaining the domestic market if, at the same time, it is flooded with imports that take up that demand.

I shall conclude by narrowing my speech to a plea that we should redouble our efforts to promote British beef, not only as a wonderful product but as an entirely safe product which we should be proud to talk about, and which we should all encourage all and sundry to eat.

7.7 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): It is obvious to all of us in the Chamber and beyond that there is a deep crisis in agriculture in the United Kingdom. It is also obvious to Welsh Members that the crisis is deeper in Wales. For example, in my constituency it is estimated that one family in five is in some way connected with agriculture. The loss to the various rural economies of Wales is extremely deep.

Some weeks ago I had the privilege of conducting some research in Dyfed with the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs. I was astonished by what I heard. I shall preface my remarks by saying that, when a nuclear power station was closed in my constituency, there was gloom and doom and talk of economic disaster. That closure involved a loss of £10 million per annum to the local economy of south Meirionnydd. I was astonished to hear that, because of the current collapse of the milk price, no less than £9 million per month is being lost in the old county of Dyfed. One should try to imagine the effect that that is having on local businesses and on the structure and—to use a word used earlier—the fabric of rural life. It is an absolute crisis.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) mentioned double or triple whammies. We have a beef crisis, and—because of the strength of the pound—a lamb crisis. Moreover, the milk price has collapsed completely. As all hon. Members are aware, there is a complete crisis whose existence only a fool would deny.

The House should be questioning supermarkets' role in the crisis. It is often said that bank managers are quite ready and willing to lend one an umbrella, but that they will want it back when it rains. I am beginning to wonder whether supermarkets have been entirely forthright with their customers and with Select Committees. I am absolutely certain that, in the past couple of years, they have not been very discerning in the way in which they have sourced their meat. They have a lot to answer for. Supermarkets have used the perceived unpopularity of British beef to fill their shelves with rubbish from abroad. Although I am not anti-European or against any foreign country, I am sure that Welsh and other British beef is the best, safest, cleanest and generally healthiest available.

I readily admit that I am not an economist. Nevertheless, I cannot understand who on earth is making any money when producers and abattoirs are being paid less and supermarkets are selling at a loss. Businesses have been mentioned in this debate. Before I was elected to the House, I had a business and employed 28 people, so I am not completely ignorant of business practice. I have to question the role played by supermarkets in the crisis, however.

Representatives of one supermarket chain appeared before the Welsh Affairs Committee, and said—with a straight face—"Yes, we are losing money. We have been losing money on meat for the past two years." I am not gullible, and I am not completely convinced that that is the case. Although I understand the idea behind loss leaders and realise that some supermarkets have over the years sold milk at a loss to bring in customers, I do not accept that that applies to meat.

When questioned, representatives of one chain store—including an army of economists and other experts—could not answer simple questions from people such as me. Although I do not understand accounts very well, I had to ask about columns marked "miscellaneous" on the expenditure side. The hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) nods; perhaps he recalls that exchange. The experts could not reply to our questions and did not know what the miscellaneous expenditure comprised. However, curiously enough, that expenditure was precisely the thing that tipped the balance and made it unprofitable to sell meat. I shall leave the matter there.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I have a great deal of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that a most helpful statement on a related matter that the Minister could make today—his doing so would cast light also on the beef issue—would be to ask the Monopolies and Mergers Commission specifically to investigate both the retail and the wholesale sides of the milk market?

Mr. Llwyd: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. That market also is a very great concern, and I urge the Minister to deal with that matter in his reply. Huge swathes of rural areas in the United Kingdom are under extreme pressure. His point was well made.

The Welsh Affairs Committee concluded that there was a very strong case for an in-depth independent study of the retail pricing of meat products to be conducted. Perhaps the Office of Fair Trading could conduct such a study and really delve into the matter, to establish the exact nature of the problem and whether we are being informed of the true situation. Our report stated that research commissioned by retailers—however impartial it may be—will not be convincing.

Ironically, at the same time as we are dealing with the retail problem, producers' bargaining power is being limited—indeed, greatly weakened—because of the development of so-called producer clubs in which farmers sell animals straight from the farmyard. As soon as a sufficient number of farmers have joined such clubs, cattle auctions will close and a near-monopoly will be established, directly affecting prices. The hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) mentioned those points, and I fully agreed with her.

Earlier today, there was a lobby in the other place, in the Attlee Room. I should like to apologise—I cannot apologise any more publicly than in *Hansard*—for not being there. *[Interruption.]* I was waiting to be called. The lobby was advocating that we should ensure that we keep our cattle auctions and a reasonable price floor, both of which are extremely important.

Let us not make any mistakes about the matter. Even if the ban is lifted tomorrow—I hope that it will be lifted very soon—the market will not recover overnight. Sterling's strength has already been mentioned in this debate, and I shall not deal with that issue again. However, we have also lost markets to other producer parts of the world. The loss of those markets should bring home to the Minister the importance of marketing. Marketing is key, and it is vital that we get on with it as soon as possible. Improved marketing is how we will recover our markets in the medium term.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting the Austrian and Irish ambassadors, as part of a programme initiated by Plaid Cymru to try to urge our colleagues on the European mainland to help in lifting the ban and getting things moving. I was pleasantly surprised when not only those ambassadors but others said, "You in Wales, rural England, Scotland and Northern Ireland have an excellent product. You have a truly green product that is properly reared. But people in Europe don't realise that."

The Austrian ambassador said, "Welsh, English, Scottish and, of course, Northern Irish branding is very important. You could split it up in that way." She said that some small Austrian valleys produce one type of cheese, whereas neighbouring valleys produce a completely different brand. All their products are to serve a discerning market. We have to emphasise such branding and markets in developing our marketing strategies. However, I agree also that—as has been said in this debate—we have to encourage everyone in Britain to insist on home-produced meat.

We have been told that red meat consumption has been declining. We will therefore have to diversify our products and put more value-added products on the shelves.

I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) when the all-Wales environment scheme will come on line. Although the scheme was—rightly—much trumpeted in last year's royal show, we are still waiting for it. There have been no details about it. May I urge him, with respect, to ensure that the scheme is financially attractive to farmers. If it is not attractive, it will wither on the vine and be of absolutely no use. I am sure that that one small step could be taken.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said that the Agriculture Committee had been very successful because at least two of its recommendations had been implemented while the report was at the printers. The report perhaps should be included in "The Guinness Book of Records". Alas, the situation has not been the same with the Welsh Affairs Committee's report. We said in our report of 12 May:

"There is immediate need for emergency aid to enable farmers to survive."

We await that emergency aid. Nothing has appeared so far, although the crisis is deepening daily. I urge Ministers please to do what they can to get the industry and the Government moving, because there is a crisis.

We have heard much about agrimonetary compensation. Although it is true that a sum has been drawn down from Europe, more could be drawn down. I fully understand the Fontainebleau protocol, which—when boiled down into ordinary people's language—means that 71p in each pound of compensation will have to be paid by the British taxpayer. I tell British taxpayers that the whole of the UK's rural economy is suffering a real crisis. I am sure that British taxpayers could be persuaded that the help that is needed should be provided. A crisis deserves crisis management or an answer that solves the crisis. Simply saying that the taxpayer will not accept something is no answer at all.

Some weeks ago I was at Ysbyty Ifan in my constituency to speak to a group of young farmers. There must have been in the region of 40 or 50 youngsters there. Incidentally, Ysbyty Ifan is probably one of the most Welsh villages in Wales. It is a very well established community that goes back many centuries. I was speaking about life on the Westminster farm which can be pretty dirty, although it is clean this evening—at least, I do not have my wellington boots with me tonight.

A youngster of 14 or 15 had a piece of cake and a cup of tea with me. He told me that his parents, their parents and three or four generations of his family had farmed in Ysbyty Ifan. This youngster, in my presence and in the presence of 40 or 50 other people, had tears in his eyes when he asked what the future held and whether I thought that he and his little brother would be able to take over the farm. I said that I was sure it would all come right, but that it would need much hard work.

The Minister of Agriculture is not here today, but with all due respect—I do respect him—his response to the crisis has not been worthy of him. He may be constrained by the Treasury or by something else—I know not—but I think he could have done more. It is no use sitting on the fence any longer. I know that something has been done, but it is not enough. I plead with Ministers, because the clock is ticking. We need to get things moving as soon as we can. If more is not done in the short term, the electorate will be confirmed in their view that new Labour either does not understand rural life or does not care. I am not sure which is worse.

The time to act is now, and I urge the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Bridgend and the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to act on the recommendations made by both Select Committees. Let us move forward in concert and get the industry back on its feet for the sake of all our rural areas.

7.21 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): In the spirit of the debate, I shall keep my remarks brief, so that everyone who wishes to contribute has the opportunity to do so.

The introductory sentence of the report by the Select Committee on Agriculture is prophetic, not to mention stark:

"The beef industry in the UK is in a critical condition, because of the BSE crisis, the strength of sterling and the long-term decline in consumer demand."

The first two of those three reasons have been well rehearsed, but it is worth reminding the House that the cost to the Exchequer, as outlined in the National Audit Office report, will be something over £4 billion by 2000. Even on the day that we heard about the comprehensive spending review, that is a seriously large figure.

Another aspect of the problem is the loss of sales. In the United Kingdom alone, at the peak of the crisis there was a 30 per cent. fall in sales. Overnight, the introduction

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of the beef ban, not only by the European Union but by other interested parties, led to some £500 million in exports being lost. However, the real impact of the crisis, which has taken up most of the debate, is the cost to individual producers.

We all know that there has been a massive fall in farm incomes. Labour does not hide from that fact. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) waxed lyrical in explaining exactly what that fall means, and Opposition Members highlighted how the industry has faced the decline, even though it has been difficult.

The strength of sterling has also been well documented. Although we could argue with the analysis of Opposition Members, what sticks in our craw is their rhetoric. It is easy to outline the problem, but they offer no solutions. We all know that the problem with the pound at the moment is that it is being used as a hedge against the euro, whether the euro works or not, and that is something we have to face. Whatever the Government's strategy, the euro debate will be held in due course, and we shall continue to face the problem of the rising value of the pound until there is clarity on all sides of the debate.

I shall speak briefly about the third reason for the crisis, as identified by the Select Committee. It has been mentioned, but it is difficult not to underestimate it—it is the changing nature of the beef industry itself. On the one hand, beef producers feel sore and are asking for more support. On the other, the Government—and, to be fair, the previous Administration—have put considerable resources into the industry to support it.

There have been several initiatives: the over-30-months scheme, the cull, the calf processing aid scheme, agrimonetary compensation drawn down at Christmas, help in setting up the cattle traceability scheme and the decision not to pass on the specified risk material control costs to the industry. Specific help to, for example, the hill livestock compensatory allowance areas, and help with marketing via the Meat and Livestock Commission, have always been part of the support that the industry has received from Governments of all colours. That help continues to be offered, but, as the Select Committee makes only too clear, we are considering an industry that is experiencing long-term change, if not decline. We cannot hide from that.

It is good to hear that the consumption of beef is recovering. We can play about with the statistics, but in terms of agricultural output, the beef industry is of greater importance in this country than the EU average. That puts the matter into context, but there has been a fall in the consumption of red meat for a long time. Consumer tastes are somewhat fickle. I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), who is no longer in his place, mention consumer resistance to genetically modified organisms and to the use of antibiotics for livestock. Consumers are increasingly aware of what they are being asked to buy, and if they do not like something, they will not purchase it. We cannot escape how those factors have affected the industry.

If one reads all the documentation that has become available, one cannot but be confused about how the food chain operates for the beef market. It is convoluted and difficult to understand, and perhaps change is long overdue. We do not have to go as far as the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) suggested—he spoke about producer clubs—but we can nevertheless understand that rationalisation of the industry is long overdue.

It is good to see the symmetry between the Government's response and the Select Committee's original report. Often, a Government's response and the recommendations of a Select Committee are at variance, but that is not so in this instance, which has already been mentioned.

There has been a lack of progress in one respect—it has nothing to do with the Government, but is connected with drawing down money from Europe—and that is the retirement scheme. As has been said, greater efficiency will not solve the problem, as it could result in increased surplus production of beef. Many producers simply want a way out, and they should be allowed to retire gracefully. We hope that others will come into the market as it recovers.

Two further considerations should be borne in mind. The first, which has been touched on in the debate, is the overall price of food. I am not frightened to say that the price of food has probably bottomed out. We cannot combine quality and price reduction. We learned an awful lesson from the BSE crisis. We drove down prices to such an extent because of the belief that imports could be reduced, and we have borne the consequences.

The second point, which is linked to the first, relates to the structure of the food business. There is a need for producers, middle persons and retailers to work together, but there also has to be a level playing field. Reference has been made to the Tesco-sponsored report by London Economics. One can be sceptical about the final report, but there is obviously an element of truth in the finding that there is not excessive profit making, as additional costs have had to be borne by all elements in the food industry, not least in food preparation. I visited my local Co-op supermarket—and I am a Co-operative Member—where I saw the care and quality that go into food preparation.

In conclusion, it is important that we take into account all those important factors. The Select Committee has produced a good report to which the Government have responded, but we must look for long-term change in the industry, and I believe that it will happen.

7.31 pm

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, which has been well informed and based on two authoritative reports. I am a member of the Welsh Affairs Committee, which produced a report on the crisis in the livestock industry in Wales. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), who chaired the Select Committee. We interrupted another inquiry in order to undertake this one, and we worked on it for six months to produce an authoritative report that criticises much of what has been going on. It is an honest report, and I commend it.

I gave a presentation on the Select Committee report to the National Farmers Union in Monmouthshire recently. There is a significant farming interest in my constituency. Indeed, farming is probably the largest single industry in Monmouthshire. I am also grateful for the briefing material that the NFU and others have supplied.

All but two of the hon. Members on the Welsh Affairs Committee represent constituencies with significant farming interests. We took evidence from the main farming unions and from the Welsh Office. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), for listening to the debate this evening. We also had the opportunity to question the supermarkets—Tesco, Sainsbury, Safeway, the Co-op and Marks and Spencer. We tried to reflect the concerns of farmers in our constituencies about what was happening in the supermarkets and the allegations of profiteering.

Having heard the evidence—sometimes in confidence—we remained unconvinced. I do not wish to make accusations, although I know that they have been made against Tesco, which claimed that it has not made any money from selling meat for five years. Tesco will shortly be opening a new store in Chepstow in my constituency, which is welcome. The Tesco distribution centre in Magor employs 400 people, many of whom are my constituents, so I do not want to join the bandwagon criticising certain supermarkets.

The Select Committee made a number of visits to food producers in Wales and obtained a considerable amount of evidence. We looked into the crisis affecting farmers, the meat supply chain and the changing relationship between producers, prices and imports. We discovered that, if there is a crisis in the United Kingdom industry, it is worse in Wales. The decline in farm incomes has been 37 per cent. in the United Kingdom and 44 per cent. in Wales. The Select Committee concluded:

"The prices that farmers get for their animals has fallen dramatically . . . prices now barely—and in some cases do not—cover the cost of production. Cattle prices in Wales have fallen by 30 per cent. in two years and lamb by 39 per cent. The price of milk has fallen by 17 per cent. in a year."

Welsh agriculture is dominated by livestock production. The beef, sheep and milk sectors account for 87 per cent. of the gross output in Welsh agriculture and 80 per cent. of Wales is designated less-favoured areas where 40 per cent. of farms returned incomes of under £10,000. One in four jobs in rural Wales are in agriculture, and for each job in agriculture there are four to five in related ancillary industries. Farming is at the heart of Welsh life and at the heart of Monmouthshire life.

The Select Committee stated:

"It is no exaggeration to suggest that much of Welsh agriculture will be destroyed within a decade unless urgent action is taken to reverse the decline."

We took evidence from the Meat and Livestock Commission, which showed that the price spread for British beef increased from 48.6 per cent. in 1996 to 54 per cent. in November 1997.

We concluded that the industry is in crisis, and in Wales it is harder hit than elsewhere. The crisis strikes at the heart of Welsh rural life. We do not condone the violence that occurred in some of the ports, but we sympathise with the frustration that led to it. The Select Committee called for immediate help, to enable farmers to avoid bankruptcy. On the basis of the available evidence, we could not tell whether supermarkets were profiteering, but there was some scepticism about the costs that they claimed were being borne in the retailing of meat.

The Select Committee recommended that the Government should aid the long-term development of the meat industry. We were particularly concerned to find that there was no freezing facility in Wales. Frozen food manufacturers claimed that they got all their lamb from New Zealand because they could not get the quantity or quality that they required in Wales. If Wales has an abundance of anything, it is certainly lamb, but the frozen food manufacturers are not using it because there is no freezing facility in Wales. I urge the Government to consult other organisations and bodies to find out whether that is an important aspect of rural economic development.

I welcomed the Government's announcement before Christmas of £85 million for Wales. It was more than some of us had feared it might be, but it was not as much as many of us had hoped. Some of the farmers in my constituency have received very little of that money. The Government's paying the start-up costs of the cattle traceability system has been welcomed, as has the fact that the charges for specified risk material will not be borne by the industry.

The introduction of the beef labelling scheme to ensure that beef is not inaccurately labelled, and the establishment of the Food Standards Agency, have also been welcomed, as has the lifting of the beef ban in Northern Ireland. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends who will be involved in the negotiations to do their best to ensure the lifting of the beef ban as soon as possible.

The Select Committee recommended that more could be done to satisfy the demand for organic produce and to help farmers form co-operatives, and that the lack of a freezing facility for lamb should be remedied.

Tonight there is a reception on behalf of the livestock auctioneers and markets. There are two livestock markets in my constituency, in Abergavenny and in Monmouth. They are part of the culture of those towns. I should hate to see them lost, especially to new supermarkets, as that would make the situation worse. Next week, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South and I will be attending the royal Welsh show along with other right hon. and hon. Members.

We cannot deny that there has been a crisis, and we urge the Government to do more. I hope that the worst is over, but I fear that that may not be the case. If the Government can ensure the lifting of the beef ban and the value of the pound declines, I hope that we shall see a future for our industry, especially the small family farms in Wales.

7.39 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): This has been an extremely good debate, with the House of Commons on its best behaviour debating well-informed Select Committee reports. I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members who have made informed contributions to this serious subject. Anyone standing at either Dispatch Box must take seriously what the Select Committees have to say about an industry that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said in his excellent opening remarks, is worth some £1.7 billion.

Beef is a serious industry. It is crucial to the United Kingdom's rural fabric. As the two reports acknowledge, its difficulties cannot be ignored. The Meat and Livestock Commission has told me that 327,000 people are employed on holdings on which there are cattle. The importance of the beef industry should not be underestimated.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire drew attention to the fact that the measures taken against BSE—the problem that underpins the crisis in the beef industry—were aimed at protecting public health. Before the awesome announcement on 20 March 1996, the previous Government had maintained beef markets in Europe open, with expenditure of £240 million, as the National Audit Office report reminds us. Only after that did new science illustrate some of the problems, and the cost of BSE rose towards £4 billion. That money was not shovelled into farmers' pockets and did not make them rich. Perhaps some of it could have been spent better, but the need to act quickly in the interests of public health drove the policy of the previous Government.

I was interested in the Government's reply to the Select Committee. Some hon. Members have talked about the asymmetry between it and the Select Committee report. I was saddened by the lack of vision, passion or enthusiasm for the beef industry in the Government's cold words. When I talk to those involved in the livestock industry, their passion and commitment comes through. It is their life. The BSE crisis has been one of their most traumatic experiences. They have seen many good animals that they have raised go to slaughter. That has not been easy. The Minister has referred to that many times, and I pay tribute to him for doing so.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), I have spent time with beef producers in preparing for the debate. I should like to repeat the questions that they are asking. I asked them what they wanted to know from the Government in response to the Select Committee. They want information about the lifting of the beef ban, a clear indication on the calf processing scheme, some guidance about the over-30-months scheme, answers to queries about the operation of cattle passports and, above all, a clear statement from the Government of their confidence in British beef.

Reference has been made to 70 local authorities—of which 64 are Labour-controlled—that are not serving beef. That shows the job to be done. When I rang Birmingham city council's direct service organisation—I thought that the Minister's influence would move his council—I found a schizophrenic situation. I was told that the council had made no decision to approve and endorse the serving of beef, but in pursuit of better value the direct service organisation was going to try to reintroduce it to schools. That is just one local authority. When I asked whether it would help if the Government made an announcement that would help to boost confidence, the clear answer was yes.

I appreciate that the MLC has a vital task in rebuilding confidence in British beef and helping to turn back the tide of declining beef consumption. Whatever the Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food can do to help reaffirm the safety of British beef will be a service to all the farmers, I have met and, to the beef industry.

Raising the beef ban must be the number one issue. I know that the Government have been working hard to get other European heads of state to agree that the Florence requirements—an agreement that the previous Government negotiated—have all been implemented. I wrote to the other 14 member states to find out what the barriers were. I wanted to show them that we have done everything we have been asked to do, and to know why they do not agree to the lifting of the ban.

Sadly, some of the comments in the European press made by people in France and Germany when the Commission agreed that we had met the requirements and that the ban should be lifted leave me with a nagging worry about how long other Governments will keep up the pretence that we have not done all that we have to do. In an article entitled "Vache 'Folle" in *Le Monde* on 11 June 1998, a French Minister was reported as saying that the French Government would examine the proposal to ensure that the safety first principle of the Florence agreement was respected. What on earth does he mean by the safety first principle and respecting it? I thought that we had done everything.

It would be helpful if the Minister could tell us where we stand. I share the concern of other right hon. and hon. Members that not until the German elections are out of the way will we stand the remotest chance of getting the ban lifted. The CDU representative, Mr. Böge, who chairs the German Parliament's BSE investigation committee, was reported in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as wanting BSE exterminated before he would contemplate the lifting of the ban. Sadly, there is still scepticism among our continental partners, despite the huge efforts that have been made.

Many of the speeches we have heard this evening have referred to the impact on the economics of farming. Two figures stand out from the Ministry's data on the income of livestock producers. This year's figures show a drop in income on last year of 63 per cent for livestock producers in the less favoured areas and, more seriously, of 76 per cent. in the lowlands.

Mr. Robert Foster, a much respected commentator on livestock, has told me that he fears for lowland livestock producers, not so much from the economic point of view as because of the disruption for the rest of farming if they go out of beef production. Many of them may adjust their farming practices, which will affect others. Mr. Foster was also concerned that animals may be produced in the wrong places, with food moving to the animals rather than the other way round. I hope that the Minister will consider that sage advice from so worthy a commentator.

The Government's comprehensive spending review covered the calf processing scheme. Will the Minister clarify the Government's position? In their consultation document, they said:

"The Government's initial view is that the CPAS should be closed in the UK on 30 November 1998. It is recognised that this will have implications for calf producers' returns."

Later, the document says:

"No final decision has yet been taken and views are invited, by 2 July 1998."

The livestock producers to whom I have talked accept that the scheme has to change. Many would like a phased reduction in the current aid so that the price of pure beef-bred calves was lowered, finishers' input prices were lowered and we could start getting the economics of the industry back into some order. They also see dairy bull crosses, with the lower price of calves, as a way of encouraging home-produced processing beef, turning back some of the tide of imports resulting from the strength of the pound. The expenditure review talks about

the calf processing scheme ending. The terminology is ambivalent, and it would be useful to know whether the Minister is still of a flexible mind or whether the Treasury has made his mind up and the scheme will close with no further debate.

Livestock producers recognise the need for change, but they want it on the basis of a resumption of good, orderly marketing. They also want the lifting of the ban on beef on the bone. The Minister may be able to enlighten us on an important point. Although I accept that beef on the bone cannot be exported from Northern Ireland, I have not understood why, in such a closed community which has effectively been declared BSE-free, it is not possible to eat beef on the bone from the Northern Ireland stock.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jack: I want to make progress; I want to leave the Minister of State adequate time to reply to the debate.

The self-same livestock producers say that they will find it difficult to justify the continuation of the over-30-months scheme in its current form after 1 February next year. They would very much like a rolling scheme, raising the upper limit to 31 months, 32 months and 33 months as we pass the scheme's anniversary. Many livestock producers would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

I should like to turn the Minister of State's mind to the subject of the British cattle movement service. Although I acknowledge that the Government have finally decided to adopt the previous Government's policy of paying some of the costs—at least in the first year—I am anxious to secure from the Minister of State a clear assurance that, over the remaining 14 years of the Workington-based scheme, the Government will not make a profit from it. Farmers recognise that the operation of the cattle passport scheme may incur expense but, as we have heard, their income is extremely perilous and they would not like to think that the Government were making a profit from them.

Much has been said about the need for good marketing. Once the beef ban is lifted, marketing will play a vital role in ensuring that British beef rightly finds its way back into Europe's marketplaces. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire reflected on the fact that, in Northern Ireland, some £2 million has been found to assist the marketing of beef. I calculated, pro rata, that that is the equivalent of £11 million for the remainder of the UK. Does the Minister agree with that calculation? In spite of the fact that MAFF's budget seems to have been well and truly pinched by the expenditure review, will he be able in the new performance-based world in which we live to find some money to aid the re-establishment of the beef market?

I hope that the Minister of State will forgive me if I job back for a moment to the cattle movement service. Earlier today, I faxed to his office some farmers' concerns about the way in which the registration scheme in particular will operate. Although I appreciate that he will not be able to go into detail on the matter in this debate, it would be helpful if he made the position clear.

The industry would also like to know what the Minister of State can do to help boost the market for the waste products of Britain's beef industry. The beef industry is suffering from a deficit of about £58 million due to the lack of a market for tallow, meat and bonemeal.

Farmers also raised questions about a level playing field. They share a deep sense that, in some way, other people are getting off lightly. They are aware, for example, of the threats of the so-called Mercosur agreement, which is being reviewed at Community level. They want MAFF to conduct a study into whether our controls, compared with laxer regimes in countries that are sending beef to the UK, are putting us at a competitive disadvantage.

This has been an extremely worthwhile debate. We have reviewed very thoroughly the two Select Committees' findings. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's reply.

7.52 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) for concluding his remarks in good time. The debate has been very useful. I have lost count of the number of debates on the beef industry—this is probably the fifth or sixth—to which I have responded since May last year.

One or two personal remarks have been made about my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture. I should point out that he was on a farm yesterday and, while I was in the House this afternoon, he met farmers at the headquarters of the Ministry.

I have some prepared remarks, and I can honestly say that they cover virtually all the points that have been raised in the debate. I shall try my best to get through them.

Essentially, the over-30-months scheme is a public health measure inexorably linked to the Florence agreement. It is not a free-standing scheme over which the Government have control. Although the logic of comments about the scheme is there for all to see, I remind hon. Members that it is part and parcel of the Florence agreement. To that extent, our flexibility on it is extremely limited.

Fourteen Back Benchers have spoken in the debate, which has been extremely useful and wide-ranging. I shall deal later with the calf processing scheme. If I have not done so by seven minutes past 8 o'clock, I shall need to be reminded to do so.

The ban on beef exports has of course been lifted in Northern Ireland—so, there has been progress. I accept the fact that the ban has been lifted only in Northern Ireland, where exports have been permitted since 1 June. The area has not been BSE-free, as has been said, although only 1 per cent. of cases of BSE have been found there. It was quite specifically stated that the £2 million that we awarded for the promotion of beef in Northern Ireland was a one-off contribution. It was also seen as part of the peace process. We must take on board the fact that beef exports in Northern Ireland formed a much larger part of its economy than they did in Great Britain's economy.

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

We are making sustained daily efforts through the date-based export scheme to get the beef export ban lifted throughout the United Kingdom. It is important to note—I hope that hon. Members will take this on board—that the date-based export scheme is now a European Commission proposal and no longer a British Government proposal. It was accepted unanimously by the Commission, so now has all the force of a Commission-driven proposal. I freely admit that there have been one or two examples of people in Europe attempting to rewrite the Florence agreement and rules, erecting hurdles to the lifting of the ban. It is no good me naming names; we need the votes of such people to get the ban lifted. Slagging off people whose support we need—there I am, ever the diplomat—serves no purpose.

On support for the beef industry, we have persuaded the burger restaurant chains to source a proportion of their beef in the United Kingdom, ending a 15-month ban. I understand that latest figures show that McDonald's is sourcing 70 per cent. of its beef in the UK. That is a major contribution. I hope that other users of beef, including schools and local education authorities, will take note of McDonald's confidence in British beef.

I do not want to go over past events, but the House must be reminded that, since March 1996, as we know from the National Audit Office report, £2.5 billion has been spent on BSE-related measures. I freely accept that many are health measures, but I must point out that, at the same time, they support beef, rendering and slaughterhouse markets. It was important that such contributions were made. The selective cull and the massive research and development programme on which MAFF has embarked in respect of BSE must also be considered. In addition—I do not think that any hon. Member has mentioned this—beef producers receive £500 million each year in normal beef subsidies.

I know that some hon. Members are upset that the Government have not paid more agrimonetary compensation; one or two have expressed their thanks, and for that we are grateful. Most of the £85 million compensation—£72.5 million—went to suckler cow producers. It was the first time that any Government had paid such compensation.

We are constantly reviewing the situation as various dates pass. We have listened to farmers' representations on financing cattle traceability, and have decided to pay the setting-up and first-year running costs. That is worth £35 million extra to the livestock industry. It is not as though we said that the scheme would not be implemented and therefore farmers would not have to pay for it. We said that it must be implemented, that it is important to build confidence in the industry and that we shall ask the taxpayer to pay for it. My intervention on the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) was therefore quite telling.

Now I shall answer some of the questions that the right hon. Member for Fylde asked us about the British cattle movement service. I was sorting out some of the figures recently, and it is worth pointing out that, in putting together the names and addresses and matching everything up, MAFF and the Scottish Office have spent 11,000 staff days—85,000 hours, the equivalent of 50 staff years. Without doubt, that has been a major effort.

The BCMS will be allowed to recover the costs only when in due course the charges are made. There will be no attempt to make a profit, or to go back and collect expenditure that the Government have freely contributed.

Mr. Paice: It is in *Hansard* now.

Mr. Rooker: Yes, it is. I freely give that commitment; there has never been any problem about that. We are embarking on an operation that will make a major contribution to confidence in the beef industry. As I have already said, Workington will issue 3 million cattle passports—twice as many as the total number of child benefit books and new pensioner books issued each year.

We estimate that we shall record 20 million cattle movements. Comparing that number with, for example, the figure of 15 million or 16 million Visa card holders in this country, shows how very substantial an information technology enterprise we shall be running. Farmers who have cattle that move on a daily basis—perhaps from the farm to common land, or on to other holdings that they may own—can get on to the helpline. It is not our intention that they should have to record those movements on a daily basis.

The Workington helpline is now on call, having been tested successfully on its first day of operation because of the mismatch of some of the addresses. I was pleased when I found out that the president of the National Farmers Union had been given the right name and address, but there was an IT mess-up, for which we apologise. However, it proved the effectiveness of the call service, which took more than 1,000 calls on the first day, and handled them successfully.

As I believe a parliamentary answer today explains, I have arranged to put a box in the Library for all the BCMS material and literature, so that hon. Members can see what is being sent out to farmers. Over the next two weeks, the big mailshot will be undertaken—the issue of all the barcodes to the farmers. It so happens that the mailshot that went slightly wrong was designed to tell people about the helpline—so it worked.

We have agreed not to collect the specified risk material control charges, and that is worth £35 million a year. That cannot simply be dismissed as though it were not a contribution. We are also supporting the assured British meat initiative, and have awarded nearly £2 million towards the development of those new standards in the industry.

I accept, of course, what the National Audit Office says about the scale of the expenditure—that it will rise to £4 billion, even with a decline in BSE cases. The weekly figures for BSE cases are in line with the forecast that predicts eradication by 2000 or 2001; we are still on course for that. However, we shall not sacrifice any public health issue for any short-term gain; I must make that point abundantly clear.

The Government have been active in ensuring that reasonable quantities of beef are accepted into intervention, in an effort to underpin the market. Hon. Members will be aware that, early this year, we arranged for a special sale of 1,200 tonnes of United Kingdom intervention beef to our armed forces. From about mid-September, we expect the Ministry of Defence's requirements for hindquarter beef to be satisfied entirely from intervention stocks. That has helped to achieve a better market balance, and in fact there has been no intervention in Great Britain this year, and none in Northern Ireland since May.

Some hon. Members mentioned, almost in passing, that beef imports are down by 22 per cent. for the first four months of this year. Consumption is broadly the same, if not slightly higher than last year. As one of my hon. Friends said, that shows that, since last December, the British people's confidence in British beef has increased substantially, as is demonstrated by their buying it in the marketplace.

What happened last December? The British people understood that, without any equivocation, they had a Government who were not prepared to take the slightest risk with the safety of British beef.

Mr. Paice: Rubbish.

Mr. Rooker: That is the reality. Since that decision, British people have been buying British beef on a scale unparalleled in the past two or three years.

We have launched the beef labelling scheme, and hon. Members will know from my recent labours at Question Time of my efforts to raise red meat standards in the abattoirs. I have to say that I have refused another licence today, although for obvious reasons I cannot disclose any details now.

The Meat Hygiene Service is raising standards too, and we have increased veterinary supervision in the abattoirs with poor standards of hygiene. We are publishing more information about the red meat industry than ever before, to make it more open and to prove to everyone, such as future customers in Europe and elsewhere in the world, that we have nothing to be ashamed of or to hide in this country's beef industry.

There are therefore a host of issues on which we can say that we are making a major contribution. I hope that I have covered the points in the fax that the right hon. Member for Fylde sent this morning. He mentioned deadlines for cattle passports and the penalties for late application. Those are nothing to do with the British Government. As I have made abundantly clear, those are European deadlines, and we cannot change them.

We are consulting on various aspects of cattle passports now, and we shall report to the House in due course. I have covered the points about notifying movements, and about the costs. As for resolving difficulties, if there are difficulties for any cattle farmer, the BCMS dedicated helpline is available at local call rates, and will be open from 31 August for seven days a week from 7 am to 7 pm; at present it is open for slightly shorter hours.

We are on course for starting the process from 28 September, and we are watching what goes on, on an hourly basis. If there is an hour's slippage, my right hon. Friend and I are aware of it in MAFF. Together with our staff in Workington, we are building a world-class organisation.

There are two more points to which I want to respond. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West talked about the collapse of the court cases. That description is not strictly true, although the hon. Gentleman will understand that, for obvious reasons, I cannot comment on the Scottish case.

There were three other cases, one of which involved a butcher at Bletchley, who pleaded guilty and was let off with a caution for the next three years when he promised not to sell beef on the bone again. That is fine. The second butcher has elected to plead not guilty and have his case heard in a Crown court. The other case, involving Rother district council, has been adjourned initially until Monday 20 July. The law is taking its course. MAFF is not the prosecuting authority, and those cases are matters that we must leave to the prosecuting authorities.

I promised that I would deal with all the points; I hope that I have dealt with what has been said about the over-30-months scheme. Clearly, as hon. Members will appreciate, I cannot embark on a debate about the comprehensive spending review, but more than one hon. Member has asked about the calf processing aid scheme—the Herod scheme—under which more than 1 million calves have been slaughtered. It does not represent a good animal welfare situation, and it is distressing for everyone concerned—farmers, slaughterers and renderers. One does not deny that the position is very difficult.

Paragraph 18.7 of today's White Paper, about eradicating BSE, says:

"BSE cases in cattle are now falling rapidly, and the costs of the crisis to the taxpayer will reduce as compensation under the Calf Processing Aid Scheme is ended, and charging for the full cost of controls in abattoirs is introduced. Protection of the public will continue to be the top priority".

We are consulting about the ending of the calf processing aid scheme now, and I expect it to be closed down during the current financial year, but I cannot give a precise date at this stage. The obligation to run the scheme will lapse on 30 November.

I had a conversation with my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food this afternoon after attending the House, and we discovered—perhaps "discovered" is too strong a word, so I shall say instead that we were given to understand—that the decision to close the scheme on 30 November this year was taken before the general election. That being so, the papers are of course not available to my right hon. Friend and myself.

The scheme is compulsory until the end of November, but the European Union is not willing to open the decision made in 1996, before the present Government came to office. I know that that does not lie well with the fact that the consultation is to close on 30 November. However, I repeat that we do not expect the scheme to go beyond the current financial year; indeed, I expect it to close within the current financial year. I cannot give a specific date, although we are consulting on that.

I take on board the logic of what hon. Members have said about closing the scheme before the date-based export scheme is in being, and about the effect on the market. After all, it is a market support mechanism as well as part of the public health process.

I have been open with the House. No one will ever be able to accuse me of misleading the House from the Dispatch Box. I have been as open with the House as I

[Mr. Rooker]

possibly can be on what looks like a contradiction. However, there is not a contradiction in the sense that the process is compulsory until the end of November and the EU will not revisit that decision, which was taken in 1996. However, we are still consulting—

It being three hours after the commencement of proceedings, the debate was interrupted, pursuant to the resolution [1 July].

Question deferred, pursuant to paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of Estimates).

University Research

Class V, Vote 2

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Science and Technology Committee of Session 1997–98, on the Implications of the Dearing Report for the Structure and Funding of University Research, HC 303-I, and the Government's Response thereto, HC 799; The Department of Trade and Industry's Departmental Report: The Government's Expenditure Plans 1998–99, Cm 3905.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a further sum not exceeding £719,838,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Department of Trade and Industry on payments to the Science Research Councils, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering; OST initiatives; fees payable under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and Research Council Pensions.—*[Mr. Battle.]*

8.10 pm

Dr. Michael Clark (Rayleigh): The Select Committee on Science and Technology is pleased that the Liaison Committee agreed to recommend this debate on the structure and funding of university research. The members of the Select Committee think that it is a very important subject—so much so, that it was the subject of our first report in this new Parliament.

We noted that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in his statement this afternoon, said that science is an important matter for the country, for the economy of the country and for the well-being of the people. We are delighted that, in this Parliament, more scientists are serving as Members of Parliament than there ever were in the previous Parliament.

The Select Committee, which I have the honour to Chair, consists of six science PhDs, two hon. Members with science qualifications or experience, two engineers and one computer scientist. I do not think that we have ever before had a Select Committee so well qualified to look at the issues of science and technology. Most of the members of the Select Committee are in the Chamber tonight. We have agreed—I hope that I can abide by the agreement—that we will voluntarily limit our speeches so that as many of us as possible can say a few words.

The Select Committee's inquiry started in July last year. We took oral evidence on six occasions from 17 different organisations and individuals representing the Government, the Higher Education Funding Councils, research councils, universities and industry. In addition, we had 53 memoranda. The report was unanimously agreed on 25 March.

We were looking into the recommendations of the national committee of inquiry into higher education, which I will call the Dearing committee as a form of shorthand. That committee was appointed in May 1996 by the previous Government, and it was chaired by Sir Ronald—now Lord—Dearing. On behalf of all members of the Select Committee, I congratulate Lord Dearing on his report and also on his ennoblement—which is a recognition of his considerable contribution to public life in general and to education in particular.

Many of the recommendations in the Dearing report that relate to research have expenditure implications; therefore, the Government felt unable to make a full

response until the comprehensive spending review had been completed. Of course, we heard the statement on that this afternoon.

The Select Committee's report deals only with the Dearing recommendations that would impact on the way in which research in universities is directed. We recommended the retention of the dual support system, which delivers Government funds for research from both the Office of Science and Technology and the Department for Education and Employment. However, the Committee rejected a number of Dearing's specific recommendations relating to the way in which funds are disbursed.

Our report calls for a substantial and sustained increase in Government funding for university research and research infrastructure. It also considers appropriate balances between the emphasis put on teaching and research by university departments, but the Committee did not look at teaching per se, because that was not in our remit.

The Select Committee broadly concurred with the Dearing analysis of the problems in university research, but did not support the majority of his recommendations. However, when Dearing concluded that

"the funds available to support research are barely adequate",

the Select Committee went further and concluded:

"it is our view that they are wholly inadequate and that without substantial and sustained additional public investment the Government will be putting the nation's future prosperity and quality of life at risk."

Our report went on:

"We know that, in sum, our recommendations entail a substantial increase in public expenditure; we make them without any embarrassment. There is an overwhelming case for a substantial real terms increase in Government expenditure in research as an investment in the nation's future."

In due course, the Government responded to our report. I was delighted to receive a letter, dated 15 June, from the President of the Board of Trade. She said in her personal note to me:

"I am most grateful for the detailed and thorough way that the Committee has examined the issues. Your report has been of value during the Comprehensive Spending Review".

I hope it has. Yesterday's press release from the Department of Trade and Industry, together with the Chancellor's announcement today, show that the Government have certainly listened, primarily to Dearing and his report, but also to the Select Committee's recommendations. I thank the right hon. Lady for her courtesy in sending me that note.

There is an overwhelming case for a substantial real-terms increase in Government expenditure on research, beyond that which is required to make good the current shortfall. Yesterday and today, the Government have responded and shown that they realise that there is a need for a substantial real-terms increase in funding. Their announcements on the principle, and more particularly on cash, are most welcome.

The dual support system for funding university research should be retained. Indeed, in their response the Government noted that there was widespread support for the retention of the dual support system. Today's announcement seems to endorse that, but we have no indication yet of any cash from the Higher Education Funding Council to pay for research. Therefore, although dual support seems to be approved in principle, so far we have seen funding from only one side of that.

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): I hesitate to interrupt, but the statement today included extra resources of £400 million.

Dr. Michael Clark: I am grateful to the Minister. I thought that that £400 million was for the research councils and not for the Higher Education Funding Council to allocate to research. I am sure that I read the statement thoroughly, and I thought the money was for the research councils.

Mr. Battle: The £300 million in the statement published today is in addition to the money announced yesterday, as will be set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment tomorrow.

Dr. Clark: I am most grateful for that good news. We have £400 million for the research councils and £300 million—the other side of the dual support—for the Higher Education Funding Council to spend on research. That intervention clarifies the matter.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is still confusion because £300 million was included as part and parcel of the money from the Wellcome Foundation for infrastructure? Will that £300 million go towards those costs?

Dr. Clark: That is possible, but I hope not.

Mr. Battle: I wish to say simply that there is an additional £300 million. I will do my best to lay out the figures, £100 by £100, when I wind up.

Dr. Clark: Let us move on to funding for infrastructure, which is primarily a matter for the Higher Education Funding Council. The money comes from the Department for Education and Employment, and the corresponding Departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Minister has suggested that £300 million will be available. For infrastructure, £300 million is being made available following the generosity of the Wellcome Foundation. Is that £300 million from the Wellcome Foundation free money which can be used as freely as the £300 million that the Government are providing, or is it to be directed to projects in which the Wellcome Foundation takes an interest or pet projects it wishes to pursue?

Mr. Battle *indicated assent.*

Dr. Clark: The Minister appears to suggest that it is free money which can be spent as freely as the Government money. That is reassuring.

On the indirect costs which the research councils should bear, the report said that the research councils

"should pay the full indirect costs, excluding academic salaries, of the research which they fund in universities."

[Dr. Clark]

The report continued:

"all increased expenditure incurred by the Research Councils as a result of paying a higher rate for indirect costs be matched by increased Government funding".

We do not at this stage have any indication of whether the Government accept that statement with regard to indirect costs, and, if they do, where the money will come from for indirect costs.

The £407 million that the Government are allocating is, they say, for new research. If it has to be used to pay for the indirect costs also, there will not be as much money for new research as the Government had thought or as we would wish.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the subject of the Wellcome Foundation, the hon. Gentleman used the words "pet projects". Before she retired, I thought that Dame Bridget Ogilvie made it clear in public lectures that the foundation worked closely with the Department, and she certainly would rebuke anyone who accused it of having "pet projects".

Dr. Clark: I heard Bridget Ogilvie say the same thing when the hon. Gentleman and I were together at the Law Society, when she talked about how the money was to be allocated. However, I thought it was right and prudent to check with the Minister that the money from the Wellcome Foundation was not being directed, but was free money to be used as freely as the Government money. The Minister said that that was the case.

If I go on much longer, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will be breaching the covenant I reached with the Select Committee members to keep my speech short so that they may contribute. I conclude with another question for the Minister—I had three. The first, about the funding for the Higher Education Funding Council, has been answered. The second question was about whether the Wellcome Foundation money had any strings attached, and that has been answered. My third question concerns the indirect costs, and I do not think that that has been answered. I hope that the Minister will refer to that matter when he winds up.

Science is a very important subject, and those who are trained in or studying science think that it should be tackled in an objective, and not subjective, way. The Committee has tried hard to tackle every inquiry we have undertaken on a cross-party basis, as scientists and not so much as politicians—although we are politicians, too. Science is a subject on which we seek truth, objectivity and progress. The Select Committee has done that in this inquiry.

The Minister takes a strong interest in science, and we are pleased he does. Yesterday's statement from the DTI, and today's announcement of the comprehensive spending review, show that the Government also take science seriously. May I say, from this side of the House, that we are delighted that that is the attitude of the Government? We will always think that there is more that the Government can do, and perhaps the Government think so as well. However, it has been a good two days, and I thank the Minister for what he has done to progress funding for science over the last year.

8.25 pm

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me so early in the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the distinguished Chairman of our Committee, the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark). I was on an earlier Select Committee from 1992 to 1997. Half its members were from a science background but, as the hon. Gentleman said, every member of our Select Committee in this Parliament has a good science background. Therefore, our deliberations are well informed.

Our first inquiry was on the Dearing report and its implications for the funding of university research. We were operating on a rapid time scale so that our report would be available to the DTI for its lobbying in the comprehensive spending review. I am delighted that the Government have taken such a positive view of the report.

I have been involved in Select Committees for ten years or so, and therefore have been involved in the preparation of about 20 reports. Generally, when we have the Government's response, there is always something positive—provided it does not cost too much. The only real achievement of those 20 earlier reports was when the Advisory Committee on Genetic Manipulation was set up as a result of one of our reports. On this occasion, I am delighted that the Government have adopted almost every recommendation we made.

The strongest recommendation was on infrastructure in universities—both equipment and buildings—and concerned the general capital rundown that has taken place because of the shortage of money in the last few years. The figure we quoted in the report, as a kind of consensus estimate of how much was needed to make good the infrastructure problem, was between £410 million and £430 million, spread over the next three financial years. Yesterday's announcement exceeded even our highest expectations. Thanks to the Wellcome Foundation, a 50:50 partnership with the Government has produced £600 million over those three financial years. It is wonderful that the Government and Wellcome should have set out to solve the infrastructure problem over three years.

Other elements in yesterday's announcement total £1,100 million—£400 million from Wellcome and £700 million from the Department of Trade and Industry—to be added to the science budget of the DTI in those three years. It took me some time last night to work out how those figures match. Had there been no increase yesterday, the total would have been £4.05 billion for the science vote, but, with the additional £1.1 billion, it is effectively a 27 per cent. increase in science funding over the three-year period—10 per cent. from Wellcome and 17 per cent. from the DTI. That is a superlative increase.

Save British Science, which has been rightly critical of the Government over the years—that is its job—issued a press release yesterday, the tone of which was almost unqualified delight, referring to

"a good day for British science".

This weekend's briefing from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals mentioned that in the United Kingdom expenditure on science research and development

"compares unfavourably with other G7 countries, having fallen in real terms by 21 per cent. between 1986–7 and 1997–8."

I hope that industry will match the Government's record during the next three years, and realise just how important is science research and development. Today's announcements and yesterday's from the DTI are a good start in making good the shortfall that there has been.

I hope that, when we meet again for our comprehensive spending review, the finances allocated for infrastructure will be consolidated within the science budget for years four, five and six of the Labour Government, and that we can maintain an annual increase of the order of 8, 9 or 10 per cent. for five, seven, 10 or even 20 years. My arithmetic tells me that a 10 per cent. growth over seven years is a doubling of the science budget, over 14 years a quadrupling, and that over 20 years there would be an eightfold rise in the science budget. I do not know whether we shall live to see that.

Over the years, science has been underfunded by Government and industry. I am delighted that the Government have taken such positive steps, and I am pleased with the Select Committee's role in producing an authoritative and detailed piece of research which has helped to persuade the Government.

The hon. Member for Rayleigh referred to several other smaller points in the report. There was some sign that the Treasury was of a mind to change the funding structure. All the representations that we received were strongly in support of dual funding, the one mission-oriented and the other for original seedcorn research. The Select Committee awaits the Government's response to its report on the millennium bug, and we are working on an inquiry into innovation in engineering and on the advisory system.

I hope that we shall be able to develop the good working relationship demonstrated by the positive response to our first report. The Select Committee could be a kind of think tank, to help produce and to spur on Government policy. As the hon. Gentleman said, we work very well in a non-party sense, with science and the future of Britain at the heart of our deliberations, and we look to Britain's long-term prosperity.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make those few comments in the debate.

8.34 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): First, I apologise for the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones), who is a member of the Select Committee, is not in the House tonight. As the Liberal Democrat spokesman on higher education, I speak on behalf of my party.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark) and his Committee on an extremely good report. I also congratulate the Government on their positive response. That set the tone for the comprehensive spending review. The announcements of the past two days reflect the quality of the work that went in, not simply from the Dearing committee but from the hon. Gentleman and his Committee. It is worth putting that on the record.

There is no doubt that knowledge-based industries will provide the key to competitiveness in the next century. Those industries depend on a world-class science base which not only provides the information and ideas which fuel new developments but, just as critically, the technicians and scientists who man their laboratories. Britain publishes about 5 per cent. of the world's scientific academic papers—a rough measure of scientific output—yet to be able to understand and use the other 95 per cent., industry has to have in-house scientists who are trained in state-of-the-art ideas and techniques.

The benefits from investment in science are well illustrated by the pharmaceutical industry—Britain's major industrial success story of the last 25 years. Here, close relationships between academic science and industry, with substantial investment in basic research by the public sector, matched by high levels of investment in research and development by the industry itself, have helped to make British firms such as Glaxo Wellcome, Zeneca and SmithKline Beecham leaders in the global marketplace.

Those firms have created a magnet attracting top-class international firms, and top-class international institutions, such as the European Medicines Evaluation Agency, to the United Kingdom. The research laboratories of those firms, located in Britain, bring well-paid jobs and prosperity to their local communities. They are just the sort of jobs that we want to create in Britain in the next century, but we will attract them only if we have the infrastructure and the trained labour force that they need. If the Government do not make the necessary investment—they have made a start over the past two days—we shall lose them. That is why the Government's response is as welcome as it is important.

Like so much else, scientific research is yet another example of the way in which, in some ways, we have squandered our heritage during the past two decades. Both in absolute and in percentage terms, the British Government are spending less than any other advanced industrialised country on supporting research in the higher education sector—a mere £61 per head of population, compared with countries such as Switzerland, Sweden and the Netherlands, where spending is upwards of £150 per head.

Among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development partners in Europe, only Spain and Ireland spend less than we do, and both are fast catching up. However, that is before the Government's announcement, which clearly means that the calculations must be revised. Britain is also distinguished by the slowest rate of growth of such expenditures—a mere 1 per cent. per annum since 1984—of any OECD country. That is a record of near-criminal proportions, because it has left the future prosperity of the British economy exposed and vulnerable.

Even at those low levels of expenditure, Britain punches above its weight, and our research institutions and universities are a tremendous success story. A recent paper written by the Government's scientific adviser, Sir Robert May, shows that, in relation to population, we are still publishing more top-class academic papers, at lower cost, than any other country.

The Treasury must be well pleased. It has squeezed the pips out of the university sector, and, to be fair, it has worked. Productivity has increased, and costs have gone down. But, as Sir Robert himself warns in his paper, the only reason costs are so low is because academic salaries in the UK are grossly uncompetitive.

In the past, the cream of our graduates chose a research career, but if, as is the case now, at the age of 26, with three years of a bachelor's degree and four years of a doctorate behind them, we are able to offer those high fliers only short-term contracts on salaries of £16,000

[Mr. Phil Willis]

to £17,000, it is no wonder that they are opting with their feet and choosing jobs in the City which offer them twice those salaries, and the prospect of Christmas bonuses running into hundreds of thousands of pounds.

It is not just our research fellows who are being undervalued. Like every other sector, the university sector has been living off past capital and failing to renew it. The Dearing report highlighted the cost of making good the backlog of equipment renewal to bring universities up to modern laboratory standards, which are not only necessary to undertake state-of-the-art research but are demanded by the Health and Safety Executive. That cost is now estimated to be more than £1 billion.

The cost of bringing UK Government expenditure on research in higher education up to average levels of OECD countries is a further £1 billion. Britain cannot afford to ignore such investment. The Dearing report and the report by the Science and Technology Select Committee made that clear, and the Government have responded positively.

The story of the pharmaceutical industry should not be neglected. The investment in molecular biology research was funded over many years, with no obvious return except intellectual excitement and Nobel prizes. Today, it supports a multi-billion-pound industry, in which Britain has become a leading player. There are many other potential success stories if we are prepared to make the investment, which is why the Select Committee report was so welcome. It unambiguously says:

"there is an overwhelming case for a substantial real terms increase"

in Government funding for the science base

"as an investment in the nation's future".

Yet the Government's response prior to yesterday's announcement was relatively meek. They seek full credit for the half-hearted measure that they introduced last year—the joint research equipment initiative—which, as the Committee pointed out, was mainly a reorganisation of existing research council budgets, and brought only a minimal amount of new money onto the scene.

The £600 million injection of resources jointly by the Government and the Wellcome Foundation has gone a long way to redressing the balance, but it still falls short of the £1 billion needed to re-equip aging laboratories and replace obsolete equipment. It is also a one-off injection of resources.

When the Minister winds up, he must make a commitment to increasing investment in the research infrastructure on an annual basis. Both the Dearing committee and the Select Committee have identified the need for full reimbursement of the indirect costs of libraries, computing, and research support services, but, unless the indirect costs attached to research projects are funded in full, universities will continue to struggle.

Mr. Battle: I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman, but I wonder about his arithmetic. We have invested £700 million, and the Wellcome Trust has invested a further £400 million, on infrastructure alone. That makes a total of £1.1 billion, which is more money invested in science than the sum which some parties have suggested should be invested in education through a tax increase. To say that it is a one-off injection of resources is not quite fair. It is a three-year programme, so that people can break out of the bracket of annualisation and know where they are going.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the Minister for his intervention. I do not wish to belittle what the Government have done. Indeed, I have tried to make it clear how much we support what they are trying to do. However, we need not just an injection of resources into our infrastructure now, but a continued incremental injection of resources not only to keep pace with the backlog of repairs and renewals but to provide the best basis for research in the future.

The comprehensive spending review has identified some £407 million for research for the research councils. The Select Committee called for some £400 million of new money to be allocated to that area over the next three years, which appears to be what the Chancellor has delivered. That reflects the fact that the Government have listened to the Select Committee.

We are led to believe that the additional resources for the research councils have not resulted in a dramatic decrease in funding for university research. Indeed, the Minister has made it clear that the other part of the dual funding arrangement will be boosted by a further £300 million. There is general agreement that the dual funding support system should continue.

It would be churlish for Liberal Democrats to say other than that we welcome the Select Committee report and the Government's efforts to address the report and to give our universities and research councils the best basis on which to begin not only the next year but the next millennium.

8.44 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I am not a member of the Select Committee, but I wish to expand on one or two points made in its report. I shall keep my remarks brief, in deference to my hon. Friends who want to contribute to the debate.

My first point is about the performance of UK science in the international context. In many areas of science, the UK is "punching above its weight", as the phrase goes. It must be said that our performance is patchy and that there are some areas of science in which we are not punching above our weight. Moreover, our performance is measured in terms of publication output, which is falling in relation to the performance of other European countries. That reflects consistent under-investment in universities, on which the Select Committee report comments.

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has expressed considerable concern that graduates are not as useful to it as they might be, because, as a result of lack of investment in university infrastructure, they have not had sufficient experience with cutting-edge equipment. There is a real threat that, because of that under-investment, the pharmaceutical companies based in this country might start to think about moving their research and development elsewhere.

Today's announcement by the Chancellor was welcome, and I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister explain what it means in this context. Important though adequate funding is, other questions

need to be answered. However generous funding is, the UK cannot do everything, and must be selective if it is to maximise the effectiveness of its investment.

I have a number of points to make about the dual funding system; they relate not to money—although that is important—but to the way in which the two systems have operated in the past. Essentially, between them the two systems drive university research: the funding councils through block grant, and the research assessment exercise and research councils through the funding of project and programme grants and fellowships. In the past, each system was left to run independently. The result was not what either system desired.

There are clearly faults in the operation of the funding council system. The research assessment exercise decides on a block grant, which provides funding for infrastructure within universities. It is accepted that that funding has been insufficient. Moreover, the money is not necessarily spent by the university departments that win the funding. That has the advantage that it gives the universities some freedom to provide for seedcorn funding for new researchers, but it means that the funding council rewards excellence by giving money to universities to use as they wish.

All sorts of concerns have been expressed about the research assessment exercise, its lack of openness and the low reward for collaborative research for multi-disciplinary research and for applied research. I hope that those concerns will be addressed.

The research councils award funding competitively, although they have clear scientific strategies and set out certain priorities for which they invite funding. The result of those two systems operating independently has not been entirely benign. The two systems have certainly been responsible for a huge expansion in the number of short-term researchers in universities. They have encouraged people applying to the research councils for research funding to make an unrealistic and inadequate assessment of their indirect costs in the belief that, if their grant application is not too big, it is more likely to be funded.

The enormous number of people applying for money that does not meet demand means that success rates, certainly for funding in the biological sciences, are about 25 to 30 per cent. That means that enormous effort is put into preparing applications and administering the assessment methods for applications, and an enormous amount of time is spent in the peer review system, using academics who might otherwise be doing research. Hardly any time in the research councils is spent on evaluating research or the other work that they should be doing.

Between them, those two systems are inexorably leading to a concentration of research in a relatively small number of universities. The 10 universities with the highest overall income receive 40 per cent. of the funding council money, 50 per cent. of the research council grants and 60 per cent. of charitable grants. The way in which the research assessment exercise operates means that the funding council grants will follow the research council and charity grants and will further concentrate research. Unless explicit decisions are taken, we shall drift into a situation in which there are 10 or fewer super-universities, and the rest of our universities will carry out limited or specialised research, or will not carry out research at all.

Universities are extremely important to regional economic development. A Wellcome Trust study of publications involving industrial collaboration with academics clearly showed that industry tends to collaborate with universities that are geographically close to them. Science parks are another acknowledgement of the need for industry to feed off universities that are geographically close to it. In England, the funding council must have a regional strategy to ensure that centres of excellence are geographically spread, and are not the random result of the way in which the research assessment exercise happens to work out.

We need the funding councils to have policies that encourage co-operation, networks of collaboration and virtual centres so that we can maximise the investment in research equipment and ensure that universities operate in such a way that they encourage regional economic development. For people who work in universities in research, we need to get away from the current situation, which maintains an army of contract staff who have little or no security and no career progression.

I hope that we will have within the research councils a sensible strategy that achieves a proper balance between longer-term programme grants and short-term project grants. We cannot rely on peer review panels to do that, because they are part of the research community and they tend to spread the money as thinly as possible. The results of the comprehensive spending review give a huge boost to university research, but we must ensure that the decisions taken on the underlying problems are the right ones, or the country will not reap the benefits that it should.

8.52 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I am grateful to be able to participate in the debate. I shall keep my remarks brief and want only to add to the body of information that is coming from members of the Science and Technology Committee.

I concur that it would be churlish to criticise the Government for increasing spending on science and technology, but I was concerned when the Minister appeared rather casually to lose about £100 million. He said that £400 million might be available through higher education, but that has been adjusted down to £300 million. In the fulness of time, we shall all be clear on those details.

I concur with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) that the framework to the discussion has to be Britain's competitive position. He made that point clearly in relation to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, but what really counts is the combined total of public and private funding on research and development. The Science and Technology Committee drew attention to the United Kingdom's comparatively weak position in relation to its competitors when those two sources are considered together. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that one would have to adjust those figures in the light of today's announcement, but the percentages of gross domestic product spent should be compared: Japan spends 2.8 per cent., so it is way out in front, the United States spends 2.1 per cent. and the United Kingdom is well behind, on 1.7 per cent.

Some of the Science and Technology Committee's concerns have not been adequately addressed, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about them.

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

I endorse what the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said about the dual support system, which must be adequately resourced. We are also concerned about the indirect costs that universities have to bear, such as those of libraries, computing and support services, which are not adequately catered for.

I want to bring to the debate my personal concerns, especially for universities with a high percentage of science and engineering undergraduates, graduates and research students. Those with a high level of practical and applied subjects bear an especially great burden. Coventry university, for example, has a high percentage of science undergraduates and graduates and serves the surrounding manufacturing industry in the west midlands. Some universities with a strong science base may find themselves in a disproportionately awkward position compared to other universities.

Many of the new universities created since 1992 have risen to the challenge of social exclusion in higher education. They bear the extra costs of access for students who perhaps need additional preparation before entering higher education and going on to do the kind of research for which the funding is intended. If that additional spending is skewed only towards research, however, it will ignore the extra teaching costs which the new universities bear as they try to achieve access. For example, the Chelmsley Wood campus of Solihull college offers a two-plus-two course with Warwick university to ensure that students from underprivileged backgrounds have an equal access opportunity. By definition, it will take such students longer to achieve that.

Has the Minister factored into his thinking on funding the impact of the changes in the student support system? I agree with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West that there are likely to be changes in the geographical distribution of research centres of excellence. One of those changes may be driven by the fact that students will increasingly enter higher education from home and live with their families to keep down the cost of obtaining their degrees.

Universities in cities may become over-subscribed and those in rural locations—where, by definition, a student has to accept the costs of living on campus—may decline. For example, there is a contrast between a university such as Keele and a university in the centre of Birmingham, and universities are concerned about what can be done about over-capacity and under-capacity resulting from changing geographical distributions.

The effect of that can be seen in the choice of subjects. Aston university is attracting an increasing number of Asian applicants, especially Asian woman applicants, who prefer particular subjects such as optometry, which is a popular choice at Aston. That is resulting in increasing and excessive demand for the subject and in declining demand for traditional core subjects, which are in the engineering base. That factor must be taken into account when funding is ultimately disseminated to those universities.

It was Sir Ron Dearing, as he was then, who recommended in his report that funding should follow the student. That was in recommendation 72—one of the recommendations that the Select Committee considered, and one that I particularly urge the Minister to consider when funds are disseminated in higher education.

There is no doubt that, if we are to achieve and maintain our world-class research base, we must first have a foundation of strong undergraduate training. Let me end with a plea to the Minister that there should be no shortcoming in the preparation of a base on which a research structure can be created.

8.58 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Often in politics, I despair at the way in which decisions are made not on the basis of the arguments but on the basis of the power of the person advancing those arguments. That is why, for me, one of the delights of being a member of the Science and Technology Committee is that we go about our work in a non-dogmatic, consensual way, looking at the facts objectively and—I think—producing excellent reports such as the one that we are debating.

Sadly, the media pay little attention to our work except from time to time. I believe, however, that in the last Parliament we had an impact in forcing the then Government to set up the Advisory Commission on Human Genetics. I think that, when Dolly the sheep came along, the commission was glad to have taken our advice. I am also delighted by the Government's positive response to our report on the funding of university research.

Some of my colleagues have been at pains to draw attention to the extent of the scientific background of members of the Committee. Lest anyone think that we all have vested interests, let me point out that other Committee members have other life experiences. Certainly it is a long time since I could truly claim to be a scientist, although I am proud to have a scientific background.

A striking feature of the evidence that we have been given, not just in this inquiry but in others, has been the widespread support for publicly funded research. That support has come not just from the usual suspects—the Royal Society, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and others with an academic interest—but from industry. Again, I am not referring just to one part of industry—the pharmaceutical industry—but to the Confederation of British Industry and aerospace companies. It is clear that, as Lord Dearing told us, investment in research is the only possible strategy for the advanced world: it is the only way in which we can remain competitive in the 21st century.

That view was endorsed in research by the science policy research unit at Sussex university, which was commissioned by the last Government but, sadly, was not acted on. That research concluded that

"publicly funded basic research seems to have a substantial impact on productivity".

In view of the lag in our productivity, we have a good deal to make up. Nevertheless, the research that we conduct suggests that we are among the most competitive in the world.

Recent analysis by the chief scientific officer showed that British scientists top the league in terms of the number of research papers that they publish—and, apart from published research, in terms of the extent to which their research is cited by other researchers, in the context of the amount that is spent. We should not rest on our laurels, however: much of that finding is based on past funding of research, and much that relates to high

productivity is based on the poor conditions under which researchers must operate. I refer not only to equipment and facilities, but to financial rewards.

Professor Jack of the Wellcome Trust told the Committee that, over the past 25 years, the salaries of university employees and researchers had fallen by 50 per cent. compared to the national average wage, and had barely kept up with inflation. In an earlier debate, following the last Government's publication of the White Paper "Realising Our Potential", I pointed out that academic staff are now being paid less than police sergeants. That created something of a scurry in the official Box, but the figure was never denied, and the position has clearly worsened since then.

There is also the problem of the "contract culture". Increasing numbers of researchers are on short-term contracts, which means that their career prospects are very insecure, and that our brightest and most able young people are not attracted to research.

The Science and Technology Committee said:

"Ensuring adequate funding for the research base in the long term is the only way to reverse the increase in short-term appointments."

Clearly, that must be right. Not only has the number of short-term appointments increased, but researchers have to operate under poor conditions of service. It is not that universities want to offer poor conditions of service: it is that financial constraints have been placed on them in the past few years.

It is with absolute delight that I praise the Government to the roof on their announcement, although I may make a few critical remarks. The Committee recommended that, in the next three years, an additional amount of just over £400 million should be put into the research infrastructure. It also said that, when funding research contracts, the funding councils should meet the cost of overheads, which should be about £185 million a year.

With the money from the Wellcome Trust, we have just about achieved the figure. We have had £700 million from public funding, £300 from Wellcome and £100 million for the IT systems. Although the Minister said that the money from Wellcome could be used for any area of science, I should point out that Wellcome has a fiduciary duty to

"fund medical research which may conduce to the improvement of the physical conditions of mankind."

The trust's objects specify medical research, although that can be widely interpreted.

I should like assurances from the Government that physical science will not miss out in the bonanza. I was originally a biochemist, so I am obviously in favour of spending on biological and life-science research, but I have become increasingly fascinated by other research. For example, particle physics may not have an immediate spin-off for the economic good in the short term, but in the long run it produces highly skilled people who can greatly contribute to the skills of the work force. That is beyond blue skies research, and it should be supported.

I should like to deal with the issue of dual support, and to clarify for colleagues what the White Paper said. It states:

"For both Further and Higher Education extra resources will be earmarked for infrastructure, equipment and an expansion of student numbers."

It further states specifically:

"This will be in addition to substantial new funding for scientific research, complementing additional provision available through the Research Councils."

We feared that the Government would give with one hand for the science base, and take with another by undermining the funding councils. I am pleased to say that that is not the case.

Back in the Thatcher years, an organisation was founded called Save British Science. The name conjures up a lefty pressure group whose aim is to undermine the elected Government and the order of things, but nothing could be further from the truth. Save British Science has such eminent supporters as Sir Richard Doll, the Nobel prize winner Harry Kroto, Dame Bridget Ogilvie of the Wellcome Trust, Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, and Sir Richard Sykes of Glaxo. Perhaps it is now inappropriate to have a society called Save British Science. Today's announcement has saved British science: the society could keep the acronym and change its name to Support British Science. I congratulate the Government on their announcement.

9.9 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I am not a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, but I join other hon. Members in congratulating its Chairman and members on a report that has obviously influenced Government thinking. The announcements yesterday and today will benefit the British science base.

Some of the world's best scientists and engineers are still produced by British universities, and Britain is still at the cutting edge of research in many areas. Those features attract people from throughout the world to study in the United Kingdom. However, over the past decade there has been an increasing number of warning signs that we are losing our world place. Undergraduate and postgraduate students are opting to study in the United States and Japan and in our continental partner countries.

As we all know, the problem has been a shortage of funding. In 10 years, United Kingdom universities have had a 40 per cent. per capita cut in funding, and that is a great deal of money. I was pleased by yesterday's announcement and by those today that were part of the comprehensive spending review. This has been a great week for British science, and I congratulate the Government on that.

I should like to highlight one or two problems in the British science base, and I shall start by examining the research assessment exercise. When it was set up, the publications that were assessed by those who were taking part in it were those that had been published in learned peer review journals. Departments in many universities, such as the one in which I used to teach, carry out equally valuable applied research and publish the results in different ways, often in reports to Government and industrialists.

The problem with the research assessment exercise is that it has never taken account of that important work. Consequently, departments that employ staff to conduct such research either have to give it up or suffer under the research assessment exercise. Many excellent science and engineering departments slipped down the league table while the creamed-off top 12 accelerated up. That is a

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

real difficulty with the research assessment exercise, and I hope that in the near future the Minister will review the process in some way.

Another objection to the research assessment exercise is the way that it creates, to use a football analogy, divisions between universities and even transfers. One university may poach staff from another's excellent science or engineering department, and that was especially prevalent when large research groups published many papers. Even those who conduct the research assessment exercise have recently realised that that is crazy, and have stopped it and started to review departments in a different way.

Researchers who are being judged in a research assessment exercise are reluctant to collaborate either in their own departments or with those in other departments and universities, and they rarely collaborate with industry. Questions such as, "Who was the senior author and who should take the most credit for this publication?" are often asked. I want that to end. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), I should like to see more collaboration between organisations, because that brings excellence to the science base and, of course, in the past, scientists and engineers have always travelled the world collaborating. We should encourage them to do that much more in future.

The other difficulty with the research assessment exercise, as we have heard, is the amount of paperwork that it generates. I began teaching in universities at Durham in 1964 and I ended at Salford in 1997, at the election. The amount of paperwork that university lecturers have had to deal with over recent decades has been immense, compared with the amount that I dealt with as a new lecturer at the university of Durham. I ask the Minister to review the research assessment exercise and to try to cut out some of its worst features.

The shortage of research money has caused university staff to make more and more grant applications in order to succeed. I have been party to making grant applications to the European framework programme. The complexity of the forms, the amount of paperwork involved and the amount of organisation necessary to get collaborators to collaborate across Europe mean that applications take weeks of work. The burden of paperwork and the shortage of research funding, which makes more grant applications necessary, have burdened university researchers in the past decade like nothing before.

University researchers are expected to justify themselves not only externally, but within the department and the university, which generates piles of paper. That must stop if we are to hold pole position in our research base.

Does every university need to conduct research? That question is often asked, especially as all the former polytechnics have become universities. In my opinion, if one is to be an excellent teacher, it is essential to be involved in research. Reading 30 journals a month kept me up to date and enabled me to enthuse my students when I was teaching chemistry. Those who are not doing research will not have the same enthusiasm to pass on their knowledge to students. I very much regret that many departments in our universities are not conducting research. I am not in favour of teaching universities and research universities. All universities must teach and also conduct some research.

I never supported the previous Government's conversion of all the polytechnics into universities in one fell swoop. It should have been done much more slowly, as each one reached the right quality. Many of the polytechnics that became universities at that time had the right quality. I could name some, but it would be unfair to do so. I know, however, because I examined in them, that some of those polytechnics were not of the right quality at that time. They may be today, but they were not when they became universities. The conversion of all those polytechnics into universities put a huge burden on the funding of the entire higher education sector.

May I put in a plug for university salaries? If we are to attract the brightest people into teaching and research in our universities, the salaries must be available. When I became a lowly Back-Bench Member of Parliament, from being a reader in chemistry at Salford university, my salary went up by more than £10,000. That is not right. If we are to attract the best teachers and researchers, we must be willing to pay them. I have long been an advocate of a pay review body for the universities. I hope that some day the Government will take that on board.

I hope that the Government will look into the scandal of short-term contracts. I shall not dwell on that, as it has been mentioned more than once. Short-term contracts rarely carry pension rights, and one day the people who have been on one short-term contract after another will reap the difficulties that that will cause.

Increasingly, postgraduate students and other staff in universities are taking part in teaching. I have never minded postgraduate students demonstrating in laboratories, but they are not sufficiently qualified to lecture before classes of students.

There are many things wrong with the universities. We have had a weak science base for the past decade, if not 20 years.

I welcome the Government's announcements this week, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry on the enthusiasm that he puts into his brief. I am sure that, if he had not fought hard for the science base within the comprehensive spending review, we would not have seen the announcements this week.

9.20 pm

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): Those of us on the Select Committee started out from the premise that the British science base was in a critical condition and that if it got very much weaker, it could start to collapse. That would be serious not just for the interests of science, but for the whole British economy. If we are to be a technology-based economy and we do not have a thriving science base, we go nowhere. Twenty years down the line, we could become a desperately poor country because our university science base has been criminally neglected.

It has been marvellous over the past two days to see my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry and his Front-Bench colleagues riding to the rescue like the 7th cavalry. It has been heartwarming and, as members of the Select Committee, it makes us proud that our humble advice has been of service.

I am glad that the Minister's joined-up thinking has spread to the rest of the Government. I am now in the happy position of being able to applaud my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his important words in recognising the central role of science in the British economy. No longer can anyone dismiss scientific research as stuff that goes on in ivory towers or as an optional extra. It is not; it is central to everything that we do in this country.

Hon. Members have pointed to detailed difficulties that arise under the present system. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) has criticised the effect of the dual-funding arrangement. I have to take slight issue with her, because my reading of the dual-funding system is that the main thing wrong with it is that there was never enough funding on either side of the dual system. When there is a shortage of funding, all sorts of unfortunate things happen, because people are scratching around and problems arise such as those described by my hon Friend. Once there is adequate funding, the in-fighting can stop and one can take a more distanced look at how the system really functions and ensure that it operates properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) laid a great deal of stress on the research assessment exercise, as does the Select Committee report. The report is highly critical of the current working of the research assessment exercise, which operates against modern research in that it discourages interdisciplinary or inter-establishment collaboration. It almost promotes only those working alone. Modern science is not like that, and is increasingly not like that.

Having settled the immediate financial worries, the Minister clearly has many further considerations. However, I am confident that he will address them. Getting the research assessment exercise right is fundamental, and sorting out the details of the way in which the dual-funding mechanism works is vital. It is a great relief that the research councils are not getting their extra funds at the expense of Higher Education Funding Council for England funding. That is an important point, which the Minister made clear tonight.

What is important about this exercise is not so much the science—although that is important—as the political lessons that have to be learned. The United States has a technologically based economy, which operates from a thriving science base. The United States invests fabulous amounts of money by our standards—about $80 billion a year of Government money—on research and development. We cannot ever hope to match that amount. However, if we are to achieve results, we must ratchet up the amount that we spend, so that it is a reasonable proportion of gross domestic product.

In America, regardless of whether one is a Republican or a Democrat, everyone realises that science is essential. Until now, there has not been such a belief in the United Kingdom. The previous Government may have paid lip service to science, but they never put any money into it, running it down to a critical point. Should Opposition Members ever again have the extraordinary luck of coming anywhere near being in government, they had better not repeat that mistake. If they do, they will once again start to run the UK into the ground. However, now we have a Government who are building up science. Science may not be the primary financial element in the comprehensive spending review, but it is one of the important and central elements.

It is fine to have basic science research, but we must also have innovative processes if we are to maximise and capitalise on the benefits that science can bring to our economy. I am happy to say that, in a few months, the Select Committee will offer the House more sage advice, which I hope will be equally useful to the Minister. If we get things right during this Government, in 20 years, we shall have an economy that would not have been possible without that action. I applaud the Minister and his colleagues.

9.26 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I should like to go a bit further than to say that I am delighted, because I am ecstatic. If they would take me back, I might even go back to that laboratory and sort out the internal guttering. We may have had some of the best equipment in the world to do molecular biology, but every time it rained, water came through, which we saw on the benches.

Like other hon. Members in the debate, I welcome the Government's action. They are sending a very strong signal not only to Wellcome but to many other organisations, which will realise that the Government are committed to science, technology and engineering. Those other organisations will pile in. I tell those who say that we need more money that I think that that will happen, as the Government's signal is very strong.

I should like to say a few things about science, although I shall be brief, as I know that other hon. Members wish to speak. We live in a very exciting time. Climate change, biotechnology and the burgeoning world of information technology will have to be dealt with, and new ways will have to discovered to solve new problems.

I returned today from a visit with a British parliamentary group to Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where we met parliamentarians from Germany and the United States. Despite all our arguments about global warming, we ended up at a dinner with Newt Gingrich. We did not make much progress with him on the global warming issue. However, he said that he had not realised that we could not use cellular telephones in the United States, and that he would do something about it. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) negotiated that matter rather brilliantly.

International competition is what it is all about in science and technology, and we must not fall behind. Although we have come a long way, we must continue to make progress if we are to benefit our economy. I tell the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) that the Government's action on science and research has not started only in the past two days. A few months ago, the Chancellor provided £50 million for a new initiative to encourage universities to interact with industry and to start thinking—to use that word—entrepreneurially. The Government have shown over time a gradual building up to the commitment that has been demonstrated in the past two days.

Science affects foreign policy. New drugs developed in countries such as the United States and Britain are important in helping countries to overcome medical and

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

economic problems caused by AIDS, for example. Science is therefore part of meeting our foreign policy commitments.

Much has been said about the research exercise, but I would add one thing. Interdisciplinarity is very important. The old words have to change, and we need new types of committees to decide where the money goes, breaking down the old disciplines. As for training, too many young people are stuck in laboratories to do PhDs, and are simply told to get on with them. There is as yet no real commitment to training them to develop in the emerging world of science of which small businesses form a part.

I shall conclude—everything has been said about what needs to be done. Surely we should rejoice about the sudden emergence of a commitment to science and technology, the like of which we have not seen since the white heat of technology. It is something of which we should all be proud. The Americans doubled their science budget, and we are now part of a global culture in which science and technology have rightfully come home.

9.30 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I welcome the substantial accord between the Science and Technology Committee's report and the Government's comments. Like all my colleagues on the Select Committee, I also welcome yesterday's announcement of substantial funding, which not only gives practical force to the Select Committee's recommendations but demonstrates the Government's commitment to the role of science at the heart of the national economy and our national culture.

The report and the Government's response to it mark an end to an era in which the role and purpose of university research became confused and in which its strength and confidence declined. Yesterday's announcement means that the Government have accepted their responsibility for the essential funding of university research.

The message from the previous Government was that research in universities should be targeted on economic application. As such, it was becoming ever more short-term. That is not what has given this country a reputation for being the creative engine of world science. Moreover, it is not what industry wants. Industry does not want a cheap source of development carried out by institutions that are not designed, staffed or equipped for it. Industry wants universities to be a source of new, creative ideas and new knowledge, and a source of able recruits well trained in modern research methods.

Industry can and should take that fundamental knowledge and understanding and apply it in the development of technology or products targeted at particular markets. That is what industrial research and development is for. Industry is in the best position to understand markets.

Some university research may be in the mainstream towards applications, and some may be driven by the curiosity of individuals. Both elements have to be catered for. We have struck an arrangement in the dual funding system that does just that. The support that has been announced for the Higher Education Funding Council ensures that universities will be able to speculate and generate the new ideas that might not be thought of if we stick within the tramlines of established wisdom.

A major finding of the Dearing report was the parlous state of university capital support for research. For example, many researchers were working on instruments that were inferior to those currently used in industry. The Select Committee's estimate of the deficiency was £410 million to £430 million, and the Minister's generosity has surpassed that with the £600 million joint funding. It was vital that the deficiency should be made good; without it, there was substantial evidence of a likely dramatic decline in the standard of our university research.

The deterioration, once rectified, must not be allowed to develop again. Research councils and all externally commissioned research must bear the full indirect costs of the work they sponsor. Again, the Government's extra funding of research councils will enable them to meet that extra cost without reducing the volume of research that they sponsor.

Not all universities have appeared to be in a position to assess the full cost of their projects. Without such arrangements, the proposals cannot work. If every university works out its own scheme, there will be a prodigious waste of effort. Such a variety of schemes would bewilder external sponsors. I welcome the proposals to develop a common scheme of costing under the auspices of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals.

I support what has been said about the inadequacy of short-term contracts and the jeopardy in which they put those who are engaged in research, who are the foundation of our scientific capability. They are a national asset. However, those points have been made.

I should like to talk about another aspect of university research—transferring it out into the wider national economy. Although I do not believe that university research should be over-constrained by the needs of industry, it is important that the results from universities can be easily transferred to industry. The chemical and pharmaceutical industries are good at that. The engineering industry is less good.

The major problem lies in transferring results and applying them in small or medium companies that have little technological expertise. In Germany, that is done with the help of the frauenhofer institutes, which undertake contract development for small companies that provide the market targets. That is a spur to innovation in small and medium companies and helps to transfer scientists and technologists from academic research into that sector of the economy—the mittelstand.

We have no such tradition of intermediate institutions. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council is to be congratulated on establishing a few similar institutions, called Faraday institutes. I welcome that important pilot scheme. However, that is not truly the role of a research council. The aim is for research to be commercialised. It would be more appropriate for the Department of Trade and Industry to take the initiative over and expand it, perhaps in conjunction with business links. In that way, this country may better grow internationally competitive technology-based small companies. It would help to ensure that the fruits of the country's major strength in science and technology contribute to our prosperity.

This country has a record of unsurpassed achievement in the sciences that was in danger of lapsing. Yesterday, because the Government shouldered their unavoidable responsibility, that danger is passing. In the 21st century, Britain will return to the forefront of science and technology. The challenge is to ensure that those skills are applied through creative design and commercialisation to create national prosperity. It is for British industry to take up that challenge.

9.37 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark), the Chairman of the Select Committee, and Committee members on a thorough and well researched report that builds on the Dearing committee's comments and concludes with unanimous and valuable recommendations. The Government responded on 15 June. That was before the publication of the comprehensive spending review, but there seems to have been some understanding of what the conclusions of the review would be.

We welcome the additional taxpayer resources for science research, amounting to £471 million over the next three years. We do not go as far as the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams), who described the move as superlative, or the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who was ecstatic. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) was right to draw attention to the fact that we are talking about not just Government funding for research, but overall expenditure on research and development. One can see clearly from figure 1 of the Select Committee's report that Government expenditure on civil research and development was cut significantly in real terms during the lifetime of the previous Labour Government. The Minister may be embarrassed to be reminded of that, but it is in the report.

The Opposition warmly welcome the generosity of the Wellcome Trust and the £400 million of new money that it will provide over the next three years. Would it be fair to describe that as money that would not otherwise have been spent on research? Would it have been spent in some other way on research unless the Minister had managed to garner it for the infrastructure project? Is it totally new money?

It was interesting to note the terms of the quotation of Dr. Michael Dexter, the director of the Wellcome Trust, in yesterday's Government press release. He said:

"In proposing this partnership with government, the Trust was quite clear that it would not invest money that would merely substitute for government funds, or leave a bad position on current funding unrectified.

We sought assurances that even in the absence of the £600 million joint capital fund, the government would be making significant increases in basic science funding after allowing for inflation."

That clearly suggests that the Wellcome Trust proposed the partnership and that the Government were responding to its terms in ensuring that, as a condition of that funding, a significant sum would be raised in addition to allowances for inflation.

Hon. Members will be familiar with the detail of the science provisions set out in a written answer at columns *47–8* of yesterday's *Hansard* in response to the hon. Member for Hull, West and Hessle (Mr. Johnson). The first point that comes across very clearly is that this year's cash baseline of £1,349 million is carried across in each of the next three years without any increment for inflation. That means that the additional programmes of £61 million for next year, £150 million in the year after and £196 million in 2001-02 can only be at the expense of real cuts in current provision if they are to be regarded as truly additional.

Inflation at 2.8 per cent. will erode the value of the cash baseline next year by £37 million, by £78 million in 2000–01 and by £121 million by 2001–02. Therefore, of the £407 million announced for additional programmes, £236 million will be needed just to maintain the value of the existing cash baseline. An amount of £171 million for additional programmes does not make as good a headline as £407 million.

Mr. Battle: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will read the detail—and accurately. One of the things that we spelled out when we came to office was that we accepted the previous Government's figures. The previous Government left me a budget increase of 1.9 per cent., which is less than the rate of inflation, with which I have been struggling all year. I hope that he is pleased to note that there will be real-terms increases over the 1998–99 baseline of 7.3 per cent. next year, of 12.7 per cent. the year after and of 14.8 per cent. the year after that. When I studied arithmetic, that added up to an increase.

Mr. Chope: Hon. Members will be able to judge for themselves by looking at the written answer in *Hansard* for 13 July, columns *47* and *48*. The Minister conveniently includes the infrastructure funds in the figures to which he has drawn the attention of the House. Within the much-vaunted £1.1 billion headline figure there is no allowance for inflation. As I have said, inflation over successive years will erode the existing cash baseline by £236 million.

I hope that, in answering the debate, the hon. Gentleman will explain the extravagant claims in yesterday's press release, which I am afraid have obviously taken in some of his hon. Friends, about the £407 million for the research councils. Will that meet the current and capital costs of new project funding in priority areas such as life sciences? If so, how can it be spent without adversely affecting existing provision, for which no separate allowance for inflation has been made?

Does the Minister accept that, if £407 million will really be directed to new project funding, that means cuts of £236 million elsewhere?

Mr. Alan W. Williams: May I explain to the hon. Gentleman something about all the numbers in the table in yesterday's press release—which he is quoting—and in today's statement on the comprehensive spending review? His point about inflation could be made about all those numbers. They are all expressed in real terms, so any inflation from this year to next year, from next year to the following year, and so on, would be added on to those figures anyway. They are real-terms figures.

Mr. Chope: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not following *Hansard*, which gives a cash baseline and carries it across in actual cash terms. There is £1,349 million for 1998–99, for 1999–2000, for 2000–01

[Mr. Chope]

and for 2001–02. There is no allowance for inflation, but there are sums of money for additional programmes and for the infrastructure funds.

I am simply warning people who may be taken in by the Government's rhetoric that an allowance for inflation must be made before one can understand the real value of the extra money.

Page 78 of the comprehensive spending review White Paper says:

"the Government will invest significant new resources in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to support research—together with new arrangements to ensure that HEFCE and the Research Councils work together to deliver better value, transparency and targeting in the use of research funding".

Reading that, one's natural reaction was to look through the White Paper for the Department for Education and Employment's spending plans and for further clarification of what might be meant. The only information was repetitive. Paragraph 6.13 states:

"For both Further and Higher Education extra resources will be earmarked for infrastructure, equipment and an expansion of student numbers. This will be in addition to substantial new funding for scientific research, complementing additional provision available through the Research Councils."

That is confusing, because, although the Government may have produced what they call a comprehensive spending review, they have not made a comprehensive announcement about its consequences that incorporate the funding that will come from the DfEE through the HEFCE. That is significant, because we know that during the Select Committee's discussions a view was taken that the issue of infrastructure should properly be the responsibility of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the DfEE rather than the Office of Science and Technology.

Indeed, the Minister himself, in giving evidence to the Select Committee, said that he did not regard it as his responsibility to deal with problems relating to infrastructure. It is a matter for some concern, or suspicion, that we now find that the extra money being made available for the infrastructure funds seems to be under the control of the Minister's Department rather than that of the HEFCE.

I hope that when the Minister gives his response he will deal with the questions about the public-private partnership deal with the Wellcome Trust and tell us whether the £100 million for high-intensity X-rays is part of that public-private partnership. *[Interruption.]* The Government Whip knows that we agreed to have 10 minutes each for the wind-up, and I have given way on two or three occasions.

I shall conclude with a question. How will the Government ensure that the number of companies established annually as a result of the public sector science base will increase by 50 per cent. by the end of this Parliament? Is it salesman's puff or is there a business plan to support it?

9.50 pm

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): I am grateful to the Chairman of the Liaison Committee for choosing this subject for tonight's debate. The health of the United Kingdom science and engineering base, especially our universities, is essential to the future economic prosperity and quality of life of our citizens as we move forward into the 21st century. I am glad that this topic is on the Floor of the House tonight.

I compliment and congratulate the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark) on his work as Chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology. I also congratulate the superbly qualified and dedicated members of that Committee. Its reports are treated seriously within the House, and should be read far and wide throughout the country. The Select Committee has managed to push its work on science and technology out of the Committee Corridor and on to the Floor of the House; indeed, it has pushed it higher up the Government's agenda. I welcome that and congratulate the Committee on doing what I call basic foundational work, which has gone unacknowledged for far too long both inside and outside the House. It is a pleasure to be here tonight, even though we are cramped for time because so many hon. Members wanted to participate in a debate, at last, on science and technology.

Our announcements over the past two days will transform our science and engineering base and modernise the UK's research performance. We have responded positively to the Dearing committee's recommendations and concerns about the research infrastructure in universities. We have also now responded positively to the Select Committee's March report, although we had to send a holding reply in June.

The Select Committee referred to the need for substantial and sustained investment. I hope that the substantial increase in Government expenditure announced over the past two days represents the sort of investment for which it called. It sets the scene for the longer term over the next three years. We have listened to the Select Committee and taken note of its report—but, more than just listen, we have acted positively and firmly.

The fundamental message from the comprehensive spending review is that the Government are determined to ensure that we quite literally invest in the future. Our plans for science represent an innovative step change—a step forward that will take us into the 21st century. Dearing made it clear that university research infrastructure had been allowed to run down. We inherited a backlog of under-investment from the Conservative Government, so I do not take too kindly to Conservative Members quoting reductions and cuts that were the responsibility of their Government. I inherited the position, but we are now making the necessary changes.

Dearing proposed a £400 million loan fund for equipment and a further fund for buildings. As a stop-gap measure, pending the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, far from moving away from commitments to infrastructure, we have boosted the joint research equipment initiative. We agreed with the Select Committee that it was not sufficient to deal with the whole problem and that more funding was required. That is why we and the Wellcome Trust have set up a £600 million fund to provide grants for building new laboratories and refurbishing existing laboratories' equipment and other infrastructural needs.

I stress that, while at least half of the funding will be in the biomedical area, the fund will cover all science and engineering research. It is a ground breaking and, perhaps, the biggest-ever Government-led public-private science partnership. It will make a major impact on university research.

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend confirm that all Wellcome funds are independently refereed?

Mr. Battle: Yes, that has been built into the proposal. There are no strings attached.

We are building an infrastructure of opportunity to ensure that our country is equipped and prepared for the competitive scientific and technological challenges of the 21st century. The Wellcome Trust is a major contributor to the funding of biomedical research in this country, and is the largest provider of private sector funds for university research. The new arrangements will be overseen by the Director General of Research Councils and the director of the Wellcome Trust who, together with their staffs, ought to be complimented on the constructive work that they have put into the comprehensive spending review and the joint initiatives. The arrangements will also bring together the expertise of the research councils, the funding councils and the trust.

We also announced additional funding for the science budget for new projects in priority areas such as biomedical research connected with the exploitation of the human genome. That research will lead to new industries, and will transform our lives in what I call the post-genome era of the 21st century, when things will be very different. The Wellcome Trust announced it will provide a further £100 million towards the cost of a new synchrotron x-ray machine, which will be essential to determine the structures of complex molecules and materials in a wide range of subjects—not just in the biomedical area.

Together, those announcements amount to a huge additional investment of £1.1 billion over the remainder of this Parliament. Today, it has been announced that an additional £300 million will be made available from the Higher Education Funding Council for England for research. In total, that makes £1.4 billion of additional funding for research—£1.4 billion more than the plans we inherited from the Conservative party, which was sending science in a downwards direction. We are building it back towards the future. That is good news and a clear vote of confidence by the Government in the UK science and engineering base. More importantly, it is a vote of confidence in the researchers themselves.

We have taken action to put the UK at the forefront of the next generation of scientific research and the scale of investment will make a dramatic difference. Our researchers will be able to compete more fully and collaborate more effectively with their overseas colleagues. We can now look forward to a significant contribution to those key areas of scientific research that will be important for the next century, especially in the life sciences—but not only there—which hold out so much promise in terms of transforming our health service and creating the industries of the future.

The Dearing report made it clear that there was a need to improve the management accounting within universities, to identify the full cost of research and to enhance the transparency of research funding. The Dearing report argued that universities did not have enough funding to cover the indirect costs of research and proposed that the science budget should be increased to enable the research councils to increase their contribution to overheads from the 46 per cent. of staff costs on their grants to full overheads. It is argued that that would require the universities to put in place proper cost accounting, which would ensure that they could properly cost their research contracts with industry and Government Departments.

Dearing also suggested that the infrastructure problem should be dealt with through loan pools, requiring universities to pay back the loans. Dearing saw that as a way of improving the management of research within universities. We considered the infrastructure situation to be so serious that it needed immediate action. Today's plans do that in no short measure by means of direct grants, rather than loans. In other words, we have taken action now, and it has been warmly welcomed by the House today.

Nevertheless, the Government are no less anxious than Dearing that there should be better accountability and transparency in university research funds, which must be used as cost-effectively as possible. My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade announced that there would be a review of the funding arrangements for research. The review would ensure that the funding councils complement the research councils, and that they all work together to develop and deliver the best value for money, transparency and targeting in the use of research funds. Therefore, she has asked the Director General of Research Councils to take that forward in the funding councils to ensure that all those affected have a say in how the arrangements are devised. At this stage, there will be no change to the balance of the respective responsibilities for overheads between the funding and research councils. The dual support system remains in position. It is secure and strengthened.

In every debate that we have had on science and the development of science policy, a continuing theme has been the need to ensure that we exploit to maximum effect the huge benefits of our science and engineering base. We need to ensure that we make best use of our science and that the work of our universities is carried forward not only to improve the quality of life but to deliver wealth and to ensure the jobs of the future. That is why we recently launched the university challenge fund in a joint venture to provide the seedcorn for universities and to enable parts of the science and engineering base to develop the commercial potential of the research.

On a wider issue, in March, the DTI and the Treasury issued a joint consultative document entitled "Innovating for the Future". We sought replies to that consultation to ensure that we back up the work done in universities and see it into productive work in future.

We came into government saying that we would accept the brackets of the budgets that we inherited from the previous Government until we carried out a comprehensive spending review. The purpose was to set out our priorities—

It being Ten o'clock,

the debate was interrupted.

Question deferred, pursuant to paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates).

Mr. Deputy Speaker, *pursuant to paragraph (4) and (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates), put the deferred Question on Estimates and the Question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the other estimate appointed for consideration this day.*

ESTIMATES 1998–99

Class IV, Vote 1

Question,

That a further sum not exceeding £142,691,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Intervention Board—Executive Agency in giving effect in the United Kingdom to the agricultural support provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union; other services including BSE emergency measures; and administration.

put and agreed to.

Class IV, Vote 2

Question,

That a further sum not exceeding £389,128,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on operational expenditure, agencies and departmental administration including BSE related measures; promote food safety; take action against diseases with implications for human health; safeguard essential supplies in an emergency; promote action to alleviate flooding and coastal erosion; to protect the rural economy particularly in Less Favoured Areas; encourage action to reduce water and other pollution and by other measures to safeguard the aquatic environment including its fauna and flora; improve the attractiveness and bio-diversity of the rural environment; implement MAFF's CAP obligations efficiently and seek a more economically rational CAP while avoiding discrimination against UK businesses; create the conditions in which efficient and sustainable agriculture, fishing, and food industries can flourish; take action against animal and plant diseases and pests; encourage high animal welfare standards; provide specialist support services, allocate resources where they are most needed; manage and develop staff; undertake research and development; and provide for the expenditure of the Ministry's executive agencies.

put and agreed to.

Class V, Vote 2

Question,

That a further sum not exceeding £719,838,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 1999 for expenditure by the Department of Trade and Industry on payments to the Science Research Councils, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering; OST initiatives; fees payable under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and Research Council Pensions.

put and agreed to.

ESTIMATES AND SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 1998–99

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then put the Question required to be put pursuant to paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 55 (Question on voting of estimates &c.).*

Resolved,

That a further sum not exceeding £110,476,127,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges for Defence and Civil Services for the year ending on 31st March 1999, as set out in House of Commons Papers Nos. 635, 636, 637 and 783.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing resolutions *and the two motions of 6 July relating to estimates*: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Alistair Darling, Mr. Geoffrey Robinson, Dawn Primarolo and Mrs. Helen Liddell do prepare and bring it in.

CONSOLIDATED FUND (APPROPRIATION) (NO. 2) BILL

Dawn Primarolo accordingly presented a Bill to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the year ending on 31st March 1999; and the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. [Bill 224.]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Registration of Political Parties Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

10.2 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Before we come to the important business of the Registration of Political Parties Bill, I seek your guidance on how I should proceed.

Yesterday, I raised a point of order with Madam Speaker regarding the answering of parliamentary questions, particularly in relation to questions that I had put to Ministers about how they were dealing with Members' correspondence. I hope that all hon. Members are interested in ensuring that we receive prompt replies from Ministers.

I tabled a series of questions some months ago, and received answers from all the different Departments. Yesterday, after giving Ministers a week to say how quickly they were responding to Members' letters—we had a good response from the Department of Trade and Industry—most Ministers said that they were delaying answering. Some of those questions were referred to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and he has given us what he describes as a substantive reply, which is that he will publish the figures shortly.

My point of order to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that questions tabled by Members are usually answered on the record and printed in *Hansard*. If questions are answered by way of some sort of published list, which will be given out by a Minister on behalf of all his colleagues, that will not be published in *Hansard*, and the public and hon. Members will not know what Ministers are doing in terms of responding to letters.

I seek your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about how we can get on the record perfectly proper requirements to find out what Ministers are supposed to be doing in this place, so that we do not find yet again that information is published in newspapers or in documents in the Library, but not in *Hansard*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about this matter, but I am sure that the points that he has made will have been heard by those on the Government Front Bench this evening.

Orders of the Day

Registration of Political Parties Bill

As amended (in the Committee), considered.

Clause 10

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE

10.4 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 4, line 11, at end insert—

'(1A) A party whose application under sections 3, 5, 6 or 18 is refused may appeal to the committee against the registrar's decision and the committee's determination of the appeal shall be final.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 2, in page 4, line 11, at end insert—

'(1A) The committee shall have the additional functions of—

(a) considering any representations which may be submitted to it about the operation of—

(i) the system of registration established under this Act, and

(ii) the amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Rules contained in Schedule 2; and

(b) making to the House of Commons any recommendations which seem to it to be appropriate in the light of those representations and which are intended to secure—

(i) that any deficiencies in the system of registration are rectified; and

(ii) that returning officers apply their discretion under rule 6A of Schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983 (Nomination papers: name of registered political party) in a manner which is consistent both over time and as between different parts of the United Kingdom.'.

No. 3, in page 4, line 11, at end insert—

'(1A) A party whose application under sections 3, 5, 6 or 18 is rejected by the registrar may appeal to the committee against the decision of the registrar.'.

Mr. Beith: The amendment would allow a party whose application is refused to appeal to the Speaker's Committee against the registrar's decision. It would apply to decisions under clause 3 on grant of applications, clause 5 on registering emblems, clause 6 on changes to the register, and clause 18 on refusing an application during the transitional stage. The Committee's determination would be final.

Without the amendment, the Bill would have no specific mechanism for appealing against the registrar's decision, so the only challenge possible would be judicial review. We hope that one of the outcomes of the Bill will be to reduce the number of legal challenges caused by attempts to mislead voters. Judicial reviews are costly and time-consuming, and can involve parties in heavy expenditure. There should be a quick and decisive method of reviewing decisions, which will not place a significant burden on the registrar or on political parties.

It may not be possible to resolve a judicial review before an election at which the party challenging a decision wishes to field candidates. It would be unjust if a party could not use a name that it was seeking to register

[Mr. Beith]

at an election solely because the review had not been determined. The amendment gives that appellate role to the Speaker's Committee.

Amendment No. 3, tabled by the Conservatives, has the same effect, but does not specify what would happen if a party wants to challenge a decision by the Speaker's Committee. It says that any decision would be final, as did an earlier amendment moved by the Conservatives in Committee. We are therefore at one on this matter.

The Conservatives raised the issue in Committee, and the Minister replied:

"I do not see the use in an appeal to the Speaker's Committee if the registrar had acted on that Committee's advice when refusing an application."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 23 June 1998; c. 55.]

There was strong pressure on the Minister to reconsider the matter. He said that he would think about what had been said, and look at the matter again if there was room for doubt. This is an opportunity for him to do so, and we look forward to hearing what he has to say.

Amendment No. 2 has a rather wider purpose. It would give the Speaker's Committee the additional function of considering representations about the operation of the registration system and the rules for returning officers, and making recommendations to the House to rectify any deficiencies in the system.

The Bill is necessary to facilitate the systems to be used for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly elections, and for the list system to be used in European elections. However, it has another effect and intention: to reduce the likelihood of confusion at elections when candidates try to use confusing party names.

Many areas are left unclear, and will need to be reviewed. The amendment's purpose is to enable the Speaker's Committee to do just that. For example, the Bill does nothing to prevent candidates from choosing to use another candidate's name with the intention of confusing voters.

I fondly remember that, when Jim Callaghan first proposed that description should be allowed on ballot papers, he said:

"I would hope that most people who stand for election would have a proper sense of responsibility."—[*Official Report*, 18 December 1968; Vol. 775, c. 1404.]

There is a touching Jim Callaghan naivety about that comment. In the event, it did not turn out to be so. As my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) and for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), and various other hon. Members elsewhere in the House know from bitter experience, hope is not enough.

Amendment No. 2 would allow the Speaker's Committee to consider any representations it received about how the system operates, both at registration level and at returning officer level, and to make recommendations. A number of other issues would arise if it had that power. They will come up anyway, and will have to be considered by somebody. For example, the registrar and the returning officers will have to consider the historical and traditional associations of a particular word or phrase when examining applications for registration or inclusion on the ballot paper. That process is necessary, to reduce the likelihood of inconsistency between returning officers or between the registrar and returning officers.

Some confusing matters became apparent in Committee. For example, the Minister implied that the word "Tory" would be protected under the Bill because it is

"commonly used to refer to the Conservative party."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 18 June 1998; c. 13.]

He added that the word "Liberal" would not be protected in the same way. I have to tell him that "Liberal" is commonly used to describe the Liberal Democrats; indeed, I heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer use it no fewer than four times this very afternoon to describe the Liberal Democrats. In the hearing of many hon. Members who are in the Chamber, he vividly demonstrated that that word fits exactly the criterion ascribed by the Minister to the word "Tory".

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay made that point in Committee, and the Minister's words appeared to set in concrete decisions that would have to be made by the registrar and the returning officers. I hope that the Minister did not intend his words to be used in that way, and I have written to the Home Secretary to say that I hope that he does not think that that was the intention. Clearly the registrar and the returning officers will have to consider the matter themselves; if they cannot resolve it satisfactorily, the Speaker's Committee could appropriately review the issue.

I have mentioned candidates who use a false name. In Committee, we tabled an amendment to deal with candidates who change their name close to an election to one identical to, or designed to be confused with, the name of someone standing for a registered party. The Bill does not deal with that problem, but it is so cognate that it is likely to be raised once the Bill has come into effect. Again, that is an appropriate matter for the Speaker's Committee to consider.

Preventing candidates from using in their election literature names or descriptions that they have been prevented from using on the ballot paper also came up in Committee. The Government's view is that that is not a problem, because the parties will have no difficulty in making their identities clear in their campaigns. The Minister's argument is that the rogue candidate would not want to make public his activities if he intended to benefit primarily from the confusion of voters confronted in the voting booth with a name that they associate with another party.

If the rogue candidate got that far, the assumption that the Government are making is that it would have been better for him not to have done much campaigning or to have used a false name in literature, but I am not convinced by that explanation. It may work in some cases, but it will not work in others. The Speaker's Committee will have to come back to that issue, and it would be appropriate if it had a broader power to enable it to do so.

This amendment would not be necessary if we had an electoral commission, which would be the most appropriate body to deal with many of these disputes, arguments and interpretations about electoral law and procedure. It has never been ideal that so many rulings should come out of the Home Office; that is not a criticism of it, but it is headed by a Secretary of State to whom it owes its primary responsibility. Home Office officials take their wider responsibilities seriously, but they are the servants of the Home Secretary of the day, and it would be much better in the longer term if we had an electoral commission to deal with these matters.

We are developing so many elections and referendums, from which so many questions can arise, that a commission would be an appropriate mechanism. Indeed, it would have been better to have a commission rather than use the Home Office or the unsupported conclusions and jurisdiction of the returning officer to resolve all these matters. We do not have a commission, so the Speaker's Committee, which is being set up under the Bill and which will have an important role in this area, could usefully have its functions widened to deal with some of the matters that I have raised. I suggest that to the Government as a way of dealing with a group of problems that will certainly come down the track, and which will have to be dealt with by someone.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): One of the most important debates in Committee concerned appeals, and it mainly involved a lengthy exchange between the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who made the briefest of interventions in support of us, clearly understood the argument, and followed it closely.

In all but one respect, amendment No. 1 seeks to incorporate in the Bill the precise scheme of affairs that my hon. Friend thrashed out in debate with the Minister. They had a fascinating exchange, the *Hansard* report of which is worth reading by anyone seeking an in-depth understanding of the issue. The Minister smiles at the recollection of that joyous occasion.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): And the re-reading.

10.15 pm

Mr. Greenway: Indeed.

For the purposes of tonight's debate, I shall attempt a brief resumé of what we are trying to achieve. For the benefit of those who were not members of the Standing Committee, let me explain that the Bill's central objective is the registration of political parties. Parties with at least one member in the House of Commons—the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) is not a member of a party—will enjoy the benefits of a first-stage registration process.

That will involve a party's registering its name with the registrar of companies. It may also register an emblem, and may subsequently apply to make any necessary changes. The registrar may refuse any such application for a number of reasons, which are set out in clause 3; but, under clause 18, he "shall refuse" an application if he thinks that the registered name is likely to be confused by voters with that of another party.

Clause 10 provides the opportunity for the Speaker to appoint a committee of Members of Parliament to assist the registrar. As the clause clearly states, before the registrar decides,

"he may seek advice from a committee of Members of the House of Commons".

It should be noted that the clause does not state that the registrar "must" or "shall" seek advice. We think that entirely reasonable, because not every application would require advice. The clause, however, does not state that the registrar must accept or act on such advice—although, arguably, he probably would. In any event, the key question is whether the process is likely to satisfy an aggrieved party whose application has been refused.

As was shown by the exchange between the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, it is reasonable to expect that the registrar would refer any contentious matter to the committee. That is clearly the intention, although the decision would still rest with the registrar rather than the committee. We think that an applicant should have a formal mechanism to allow an appeal to the committee if an application is rejected. Our purpose is essentially to make it clear that the applicant can insist that the matter be considered by the committee, with the guarantee that the committee could seek to influence the outcome.

Let me explain where we differ from the Liberal Democrats. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) alluded to this. On the basis of the exchange in Committee to which I have already referred, we expect the Minister to agree with us. The real question is where the final decision should rest. We think, on balance, that it should rest with the registrar rather than the committee, which is why the wording of our amendment differs slightly from both the wording of the Liberal Democrat amendment and that of the amendment that we proposed in Committee.

The House should bear it in mind that a registrar, person sole, can reach a decision. Decisions made by committees—especially Committees of the House of Commons—although free and open, cannot be guaranteed to produce clear-cut answers. We agree with what the Minister said in Committee: the final decision must rest with the registrar.

Our amendment is a sincere attempt to incorporate in the Bill the order of events that, as he intimated in Committee, the Minister expects will happen in practice. To be certain that that does happen in practice, we should make it clear in the Bill.

There is no mechanism in the Bill for a party that is unhappy at the registrar's decision to appeal or to take action against it. That could become extremely important for the Liberal Democrat party and for some of its former friends who masquerade as Liberals. If I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may refer to that point again on Third Reading, should we proceed to Third Reading tonight.

We are satisfied that a form of appeal would be a judicial review of the reasonableness of a registrar's decision. Such reviews are likely to be rare, not to mention expensive, which is a consideration for political parties that do not have much money. They would be even less likely if applicants could make formal representation to the Speaker's Committee. The House should seek to determine not whether our amendment is a good idea and a necessary addition—we believe it is—but whether it is worded correctly. The Minister has the choice of accepting amendment No. 3 or tabling a similar amendment when the Bill is considered in the other place.

It is disappointing that the Minister has not tabled his own amendment, given the exchange of views that took place in Committee between him and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. For the reasons I have stated, we think that our amendment No. 3 is preferable to amendment No. 1.

[Mr. Greenway]

Amendment No. 2 addresses different issues, and is rather more elaborate. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for his explanation, because he confirmed that it does not deal with the key issue of the right to make representations if an application is refused. It is stretching it a bit to regard the rejection of an application as a deficiency in the system of registration.

We have considerable sympathy with one aspect of amendment No. 2—the need to ensure consistency of application and interpretation of this legislation by returning officers. We raised the issue of guidance in Committee. The Minister agreed that guidance was necessary, and said that it would be issued, but he would not include such a requirement in the Bill. That apart, I am not sure that amendment No. 2 adds very much. There will be a natural progression, and many of these matters will have to be revisited in future.

We firmly believe, having given this matter some considerable thought, that the Bill should provide applicants with a formal right to make representations to the Speaker's Committee if their application is rejected. I commend our amendment to the House.

Mr. George Howarth: As the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) said, amendment No. 1 is identical to the amendment proposed in Committee, which was withdrawn by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) after the debate to which the hon. Member for Ryedale referred. I confirm that we had a fascinating debate, and that the *Hansard* report of that debate made even more fascinating reading.

In Committee, I said that I would review the matter. I have done that, and I have no doubt that we are right. I do not say that smugly, but simply because I am convinced, after giving the matter a great deal of thought, that ours is the right approach. As the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) said, amendment No. 3 would have a similar effect, although it would achieve the ends by different means.

I can understand the reasons for seeking to provide some sort of appeal against a decision by the registrar not to register the proposed name or emblem of a particular party. I hope that I can persuade hon. Members that such a provision is unnecessary, however. If every aggrieved party decided to exercise such a right of appeal, it would simply give rise to unacceptable delay and bureaucracy in what is intended to be a straightforward and simple process.

It will be a matter for Madam Speaker to appoint the committee for which clause 10 provides, and I would expect it to consist of experienced hon. Members whose advice would be sought by the registrar when he faces a difficult judgment. In a difficult case in which the Speaker's Committee had advised the registrar that an application should be refused, there would be no point in providing a right of appeal to that committee, because to do so would be to ask it to consider an appeal against its own advice. That would be illogical and absurd.

In more straightforward cases in which the registrar refused an application without needing to refer it to the committee, to allow an appeal to the committee in every case would simply add to the delay.

Mr. Greenway: I hope that we can agree on this matter. We do not say that there would be a double reference to the Speaker's Committee. If it was clear to the person whose application had been refused that the Speaker's Committee had thoroughly considered all matters and had given advice, it is extremely unlikely that he would want to appeal again. Our key point is that the Bill does not provide the right to make representations at any time, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is in a difficulty because he and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed have said, I think, that one of the reasons for the two amendments is that they do not think that in all circumstances people will behave reasonably. However, the hon. Gentleman has just said that most people will behave reasonably.

Mr. Greenway *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Howarth: I think that that was the import of what he said.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall shortly give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I am anxious not to spend too long on this matter.

I think that the hon. Member for Ryedale was trying to argue that in most cases people will behave reasonably. The Bill's appeal procedure to allow people to seek advice from the Speaker's Committee is the most simple and straightforward way to resolve contentious issues. If, at the end of that process, someone still felt aggrieved—I accept that that may be possible—it would probably be because he was behaving unreasonably. If that were the case, why would we want to create yet another mechanism to take his grievance endlessly forward?

Mr. Letwin: Does not the Minister accept that the kernel of the matter is the possibility that the registrar will not take the same view as the applicant about the seriousness of the point, and may not refer the matter to the committee? As a result, the applicant may feel aggrieved and think that there is a prima facie case of unreasonableness. That would drive the whole process into a much worse corner in the form of judicial review, from which we hope to liberate the Minister by way of this innocuous amendment, which follows exactly the principles that he advanced in Committee.

10.30 pm

Mr. Howarth: What the hon. Gentleman is suggesting could lead, technically, to every decision made by the registrar becoming part of an appeal process. When temperatures were raised, there would be a strong incentive for that, and the process would get clogged up. In straightforward cases where the registrar refused an application without needing to refer it to the committee,

there would inevitably be a delay in the process if an appeal were allowed in every case. If the registrar refuses an application, I believe that he will do so reasonably, having considered the case on its merits.

I hope that the House will agree that a committee of Members—reasonable people with a vast amount of experience of politics and the history of political parties—that has been established to provide the registrar with advice on the more difficult and contentious cases should not spend its time reviewing every application that has been refused by the registrar. The amendment could lead us down that path, even though that is not the intention. I stress that we would expect the registrar to refer any difficult cases to the committee for advice, and I shall make sure that he is well aware of that. I am confident that the concerns expressed in the House will be registered with the registrar.

In the unlikely event of the registrar's failing to refer a particular case to the committee and taking a manifestly unreasonable decision to refuse an application, it would be possible for the political party concerned to seek a judicial review on the basis that the registrar had acted so unreasonably that no reasonable person could have reached that view. I hope that that will not arise, although the possibility exists, for the reasons that I gave earlier.

An appeal mechanism as envisaged in the amendments is unnecessary. I therefore ask the right hon. Gentleman not to press the amendment.

Before I deal with amendment No. 2, I shall respond to the point made by the right hon. Member about the vexatious issue of candidates' names, in the circumstances that he mentioned. At the last general election, injunctions were granted in the High Court against spoiler candidates using a similar name and intending to stand against, for example, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Whatever view the courts may take in future, only a candidate representing a registered political party will be able to use the party's name and emblem on the ballot paper. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept that that will go a long way towards preventing confusion arising from the misuse of candidates' names. The courts set useful precedents in those two cases, and I hope that they would behave in a similarly reasonable manner in the future.

Amendment No. 2 would extend considerably the role of the Speaker's Committee, which is established by clause 10. It would give the committee some of the scrutiny functions which it might be more appropriate to consider for an electoral commission, were such a body to be established.

The idea of an electoral commission is not new. In 1993 the Labour party report of the working party on electoral systems, which was chaired by Lord Plant, recommended that an electoral commission should be established to oversee the entire electoral process. In my party's evidence to Lord Neill's Committee on Standards in Public Life in connection with its inquiry on party political funding, we proposed that an electoral commission should be established to oversee any controls to be imposed on party funding.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept that the Bill is not a suitable legislative vehicle through which to establish such a commission. It would be sensible to await the outcome of Lord Neill's inquiry on party funding before we consider whether—and if so, how—such a body should or might be established. It would not be appropriate for the Speaker's Committee established under clause 10 to be charged with those additional scrutiny and oversight functions. I would worry slightly that Madam Speaker might be a little concerned if we were to go along that path at this stage in the proceedings.

On a point of detail, proposed subsection (1A)(b)(ii) in amendment No. 2 suggests that one of the roles of the committee should be to assist returning officers to exercise their judgment consistently, both over time and between different parts of the United Kingdom, when deciding under rule 6(A) whether a proposed candidate's description is misleading. I can confirm—this point was mentioned earlier—that we will be offering guidance to returning officers. We have already started discussions with representatives of returning officers and with Companies house on how that might be done.

In general terms, we expect that there will be a high degree of consistency in the decisions taken by returning officers and we all expect that there will be some misleading descriptions, the most obvious one being "Literal Democrat"—I see that the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), who was on the receiving end of that, is present—which no returning officer would accept once the Bill came into force. I believe that the problem will be resolved.

We must accept that it is possible that a returning officer in one part of the country may, because of local factors, regard as misleading a description that may be acceptable in another area. There are different traditions and different labels that have meaning in some parts of the country but not in others. Also, as time goes by, there may be changes in what would seem likely to confuse voters in associating a candidate with a registered political party. I hope that the reassurance I have sought to give to the House provides answers to some of the questions that have been asked.

The committee to be established under clause 10 will be made up of hon. and possibly right hon. Members, who will be appointed by the Speaker and who will advise the registrar on the more difficult or contentious applications to register a name or emblem of a political party using the wide political experience that they will be able to offer. In those circumstances, it would not be helpful or desirable to seek to extend the role of the committee, as proposed by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, and I ask him not to press the amendment.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) said that, as we go along and the new arrangements are implemented, a body of experience will build up. It is to be hoped that the arrangements will be robust enough to deal with that. Also, if there are any adjustments to be made along the way, we will have to consider them. I believe that we have taken everything reasonable into account and that we have the balance about right. I believe that any concerns will be covered by the arrangements. I hope that the House will accept that.

Mr. Beith: I seek to intervene because the Minister has not dealt with one of the points I raised which concerned the comments in Committee. Those comments seem to give some authoritative ruling on the use of words associated with a particular political party—identifying

[Mr. Beith]

"Tory" as a word to be protected but not identifying "Liberal" in the same way. I hope that the Minister will recognise that, just as he said, the returning officers and the registrar will have to work through these matters—we will have to see how the system develops—and that they should be able to do so free from any imputation that they have to regard the Minister's words in Committee as determining what they decide.

Mr. Howarth: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I know that he has written to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about that issue in a letter dated 8 August—*[Interruption.]* I mean 8 July. Such is my desire to be on holiday, that I am jumping ahead of myself. The right hon. Gentleman will receive a reply to his letter after the Bill completes its later stages.

I think I made it clear in Committee that the Government have no desire to try to choke off a future application by the Liberal Democrats, and that such applications will be for the registrar to consider. However, I do not believe that the Bill is intended to prevent already existing parties from registering. I used the example "Tory" because, so far as I am aware, no party other than the Conservative party is known as or understood to be the Tory party. I thought that that would be a useful example.

The difficulty for the Liberal Democrats is that another existing party, although not represented in the House, is known as the Liberal party—as the Liberal Democrats were known originally. However, I do not intend to go into the labyrinthine developments over the years of the Liberal party, the Social Democratic party and the other variants of that name and party. Although I realise the Liberal Democrats' difficulty, I do not think that it is the job of this Bill or of the House to deal with it.

Potentially, the Labour party has the same difficulty, as a party that is usually associated with Mr. Arthur Scargill is called the Socialist Labour party. As I said on a previous occasion, that party fielded a candidate against me at the general election, although—I am pleased to say—it did not do very well. Nevertheless, "Labour" appears in its title. As I represent an entirely different set of politics to Mr. Arthur Scargill and his party—

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): You used not to.

Mr. Howarth: I did, as I am sure Mr. Arthur Scargill would be the first to attest. Although I represent an entirely different set of politics to him and his party, I recognise their right to exist and to contest elections.

There are other contentious issues. I realise that the Liberal Democrats have genuine concerns that they will want to deal with, but the Bill is not the vehicle for doing that.

With those—I hope reasonable—assurances, I hope that the Liberal Democrats will feel that it is unnecessary to press their amendment.

Mr. Beith: I am glad to hear the Minister's recognition that it will be for the registrar and returning officers to deal with some of the difficult problems without being bound by his reflections—as interesting though they are—on them.

I was not convinced by the Minister's arguments on amendment No. 2—such as the argument that the Speaker's Committee would somehow be an inappropriate body to deal with these matters. He said that it is likely that the committee will be composed of hon. Members who are experienced in these matters, capable of giving a very useful steer to the registrar on difficult cases, and, therefore, presumably capable of reflecting on whether the whole system is working well or badly. Although the Minister chooses not to extend the mandate in that direction, I still think it would have been useful to do so.

I welcome the Minister's continuing interest in the concept of an electoral commission. I am sure that that issue will come up again after the new report, and that we shall be pursuing it. As amendment No. 2 is not the first amendment in the group, I do not have to make a decision on whether to withdraw it. However, we think that some of the issues that the amendment raises will have to be reviewed.

An electoral commission will not be established in time to deal with the issue in the first lot of elections that will be fought after the Bill is passed. Therefore, they will all be dealt with by the Home Office, as they always have been. I am not sure that that is an ideal solution.

I am disappointed that the Minister did not come up with some alternative to amendment No. 3, which deals with appeals. He said in Committee that he did not feel that there was an obvious alternative appellate body that could be brought into play. If one accepts his argument that the committee is somehow debarred from this role because it may have given the advice in the first place, we should look for an alternative body.

I do not think that one can ever dismiss the case for an appeals body on the grounds that everyone might appeal. If we adopted that argument, there would be no appeals mechanisms in any of the systems for which the Home Office is responsible. I know that the Minister's colleagues are rather weighed down by the appeals being made under immigration and asylum law. The Home Office is coming up with useful proposals to streamline the system, but that does not advance the principle that there can be no appeals system because too many people might use it. That is not the argument to advance.

Conscious of the fact that we have not yet hit on the ideal solution, and hoping that another place might look rather carefully at the matter, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 19

FALSE STATEMENTS: OFFENCE

10.45 pm

Mr. Letwin: I beg to move amendment No. 4, in page 6, line 6, at end insert—

'(1A) Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), it is an offence to attempt to secure the registration of a party which, irrespective of the party's proposed registered name, is substantially the same as a registered party, having regard to the applicant party's objectives, membership, officers or geographical base.'.

I am conscious of the fact that the Minister wants to start his holiday and that all hon. Members might wish to go to bed, so I shall not detain the House unduly,

even though the matter before us is one about which, as the Minister knows, I perhaps alone of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom feel extraordinarily strongly.

The Minister will want to know why we are troubling him with a different version of our attempt to solve the problem of split-ticket or alter ego parties. I shall tell him by answering three specific questions, which I imagine might have crossed his mind. First, is the issue important, if it is real? Secondly, is it real? Thirdly, would our solution be effective?

On the first point, I think that the Minister is of one mind with the official Opposition. He admitted, as clearly as the exchange in Committee would allow, that if there were a real threat of an alter ego party arising through split-ticket voting, and if the effect were to distort the electoral result, that would be important. Indeed, it would be more important than most of the abuses that the Bill otherwise seeks to prevent, because it would distort the essence of democratic choice. That choice should lead to the election of the party that the voters genuinely want to govern, not of some party that has been concocted, so to speak, as a result of political manipulation. We agree with the Minister that it would be an important abuse if it were real.

If I understood the Minister correctly at the time, and if I understand him correctly anew on reading *Hansard*, the brunt of his argument was that our proposal was a sledgehammer to crack a nut, because, although the problem would be important if it were real, it was not, in his view, real.

In Committee, I advanced the hypothesis that while the major political parties—the Liberal Democrat party, the official Opposition and the party that forms the Government—had made it clear in one way or another that they intended to eschew any attempt to use split-ticket voting, there might be an attempt to use split-ticket voting and the creation of an alter ego party on the part of nationalists in particular, and especially in the first elections for a devolved assembly or Parliament, in Wales and Scotland respectively.

I said then that I thought that it could be a tactic that a responsible nationalist party might employ once. Even if a party intended thereafter not to distort the democratic process, I thought then, and think now, that it might legitimately use such a tactic to achieve by lawful and constitutionally appropriate means what, were it less dedicated to democracy, it might have sought to achieve by other means—what a terrorist organisation, for example, might have sought to achieve by bombing or other means. People who believe passionately and sincerely in national identity are often driven to terrorism. It is much to the credit of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru that they have never been within a million miles of that attitude. They have always sought to act legitimately and through democratic processes.

Those parties, particularly the Scottish National party, have reached a point in the history of what they see as their nations at which there is a realistic possibility—fostered by the Government, much to the discomfort of all of us who are Unionists—of achieving in the next few months what they have laboured for over many years, often seemingly in vain: the establishment a Scottish National party Government in a Scottish Parliament, followed closely by a referendum and, if we are to believe current polls, independence. With that prize at stake, there must be a great temptation for them to use the legitimate means of split-ticket voting and alter ego parties, which have been provided carefully for them by the Secretary of State for Scotland through the installation of an additional member system and not debarred by the Bill or—I shall come to this later—by amendments proposed in another place to the Scotland Bill.

Since the Committee stage, I have had the opportunity to inspect closely the utterances of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru and to make informal tentative inquiries about whether they would make parallel statements to those made by the major UK parties. The silence on those points has been deafening. I have not managed to trace the slightest record of them abjuring such a tactic. The informal contacts that I have had have made it clear to me that they have no intention of doing so.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the hon. Gentleman consider formalising his contacts with our party and Plaid Cymru? If he does, I am sure that he will get the assurance he seeks, that we have no intention of manipulating the democratic process, because we are confident that we can achieve our objectives by putting ourselves forward as Scottish National party candidates or Plaid Cymru candidates in any election and winning seats.

Mr. Letwin: That is an extremely comforting remark if it is the official position of the Scottish National party. If it is, a great part of the reason for the amendment falls. This is a surprising exchange. Is the hon. Gentleman willing to make a formal statement to that effect on behalf of the Scottish National party?

Mr. Morgan: I assure the hon. Gentleman that for many years Scottish National party members—I cannot speak for members of Plaid Cymru, although I am sure that they follow me on this—have stood as Scottish National party candidates. I cannot say the same for the Conservative or the Conservative and Unionist party, or the various other representations under which his party's candidates sometimes present themselves in Scotland.

Mr. Letwin: I should like to use this opportunity to crack this problem once and for all. It would be a great comfort to all Unionists. I regret that the hon. Gentleman, perhaps conscientiously, misunderstood my point. The question is whether the Scottish National party would contemplate using the device of, for example, a national party of Scotland as a separate party that would enter the proportional list, while entering its candidates under the Scottish National party title for the constituency section. This is a matter of the greatest importance, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman forgives me for being pedantic. Is he willing to make a formal statement on behalf of the Scottish National party that it will not engage in such a tactic?

Mr. Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way yet again. I find it surprising—perhaps, on reflection, it is not surprising—that the Conservative party is in so much need of coverage in Scotland that it has to accuse the Scottish National party alone of trying to use such a tactic. If it helps him, I assure him that all Scottish National party candidates will stand in the election as

[Mr. Morgan]

Scottish National party candidates, and that the only party that it will put forward for list registration is the Scottish National party.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman has said something extremely close to what I had hoped to hear. I hope that he meant that there will not be another party that had any relationship to the Scottish National party that would put forward candidates, not in the constituencies but only on the alternate list. I regret to ask him again whether he would be willing simply to say yes or no to that. Alas, he is not.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Of all the countries in which such an electoral system operates, can the hon. Gentleman tell me of one in which alter ego parties have been used? From my research, there is not one.

Mr. Letwin: Contrary to what my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) is whispering to me, that is quite true. Such a tactic has not so far been used. I do not think that it would be used in an ordinary democratic process outside the very particular issue of independence, which seems to be a one-off.

I have been very careful to say—I say this for the benefit of the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) as much as for anybody else's—that I do not remotely suggest that Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National party or any other party in this House or elsewhere in the United Kingdom would be inclined to use such a tactic recurrently. We are talking about a very special set of circumstances. The reason why I press the issue—I hope that I shall make the point abundantly clear to the hon. Gentleman—is that, if I were in his shoes, trying to act conscientiously, and given the very great importance that I would attach to the sincere goal that he has but which I do not share, I might seek to use such a tactic. The matter is of some importance.

Mr. Morgan: Why does the hon. Gentleman think that the SNP, which has always stood on a democratic platform, should alone among democratic parties seek to achieve its goal by some means that other parties would not use? What makes us so different—just a rating in opinion polls?

Mr. Letwin: On the contrary, it is not the rating in opinion polls. Indeed, as the rating in opinion polls to the discomfiture of the Secretary of State for Scotland rises, my fear diminishes. The need—so to speak—for such a tactic would diminish towards zero if and when the Scottish National party entirely eliminated the Scottish Labour party from Scottish politics. In the absence of the assurance that we have almost received from the hon. Gentleman, the SNP might seek to use such a tactic because of the very special circumstances to which this one occasion gives rise, fostered by the Secretary of State for Scotland.

If we receive an assurance from the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, and it appears robust, and if, on inspection of *Hansard*, my noble Friends in another place believe that we have received such an assurance, that will much affect our attitude not only to amendment No. 4 but to amendments that have been and are to be tabled in another place to the Scotland Bill and the Government of Wales Bill. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take seriously a point that we believe—perhaps mistakenly—could have an impact on the constitutional development of the UK. It is not a light matter. I admit that it is pedantic, but sometimes at the interstices of the law lie constitutional developments. The official Opposition would have made a grave error if we had not taken that seriously.

My final point would have led me in any case to explain why we shall not insist on the amendment; it concerns the question of effectiveness. We thought it well worth while to bring this debate to the fore again, but on reflection we can see that, even in its tougher form, amendment No. 4 would not be sufficiently effective were such a tactic to be contemplated. That is because the penalty could be avoided by any party, simply by not registering itself. I apologise to the Minister if I have missed something, but I do not think that there is much else by way of disincentive, apart from the fact that such a party could not then have party political broadcasts. That, of course, would be no penalty at all if the alter ego party were really an alter ego. It would not be its intention to have separate party political broadcasts in any event.

Regrettably, we do not think that the amendment could be used as an effective vehicle for stopping the problem. The Minister has agreed that the problem would be important if it were real, but he says that it is not a real problem. We have also had what may or may not be a complete assurance from the Scottish national party—if it is a complete assurance, I greatly welcome it—that it will not use such a tactic and that the threat is not real.

If the threat were real, my amendment, which I think is the toughest that could be inserted into the Bill, might not, alas, be tough enough. It therefore has the status of a probing amendment. If we do not believe that the assurances are sufficiently robust, my noble Friends will seek in another place to introduce robust amendments to the Scottish and Welsh Bills that would have the requisite effect.

11 pm

Mr. Beith: Can anyone, Mr. Deputy Speaker, intrude into this interesting exchange between the Conservative party—or the Unionist party, as I prefer to call it on this occasion—and the Scottish National party? Indeed, in my constituency the offices of the Conservative party are labelled the "Berwick-upon-Tweed Division Unionist Association"—a fact that I have had to draw to Conservatives' attention when they tease us about party names.

The fact that there is a problem was first brought out not by the Scottish National party but by a member of the Labour party, the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson), who was the chairman of the Co-operative group of Members of Parliament. He advanced the thesis positively, saying that it would be to the advantage of the Labour and Co-operative party if it fought under the two separate labels, one in the constituencies and one on the list.

The hon. Gentleman was quoted in *The Scotsman* of 2 February as saying:

"Because it is such a new idea some of those who regard themselves as modernisers, open to new ideas might not want to take it on board. It is so radical and requires such a change in thinking".

We have moved on since then, especially in the context of the Government of Wales Bill. Indeed, we have moved on in various respects—although the hon. Member for Pollok has not moved on as he was hoping to move on in the Scottish context, in that he has not been selected to stand.

In the debate on the Government of Wales Bill, the Welsh Office Minister made it clear in the House that the Labour party would not engage in that tactic, with or without the help of its Co-operative wing. The Conservative party, too, has made such a statement, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) has done the same on behalf of our party.

I regard the statement made today by the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) on behalf of the Scottish National party as of equivalent significance and value. I do not impute any doubt or ambiguity to the words that he used, and I am sure that his party would not want to resile from what he has said today. People would think very badly of it were it to do so, but I do not suspect it of any such intention. The fact that the hon. Gentleman intervened in that way was helpful, and has completed the picture as regards the main parties.

However, there are still a few other people who might try to exploit the possibility, although they might not be in such a good position to do so. It is therefore still reasonable to consider whether there may be appropriate amendments to deal with the problem. The debates on the subject have at least served a useful purpose, in getting all the parties to make it clear that that is not a proper tactic to use in an additional member electoral system, and that they will not use it.

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I do not wish to detain the House, but I must refer briefly to activities in my constituency in east London, especially as the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), appears to be adopting the moral high ground and saying that his party is not guilty of any transgression.

At the 1994 local government elections, the local Conservatives in what was then the Newham, South constituency traded under the title "Conservatives Against Labour's Ethnic Policies". When that was challenged and complaints were made, Conservative central office said that local associations were autonomous. In those days that was right, but times have now changed.

In 1998 the Conservatives issued literature that has been deemed by the Commission for Racial Equality to be offensive and to contravene guidelines on decency and dignity signed by all the major political parties.

In the current by-election in the Custom House and Silvertown ward, one candidate is standing under the title "Real Labour". The significance of that is that four of the individuals who have nominated that candidate nominated Conservative candidates for the borough elections only two months ago. It does not overly stretch the imagination to think that something is untoward in the Poplar and Canning Town constituency Conservative association. I have written to the Leader of the Opposition on three occasions drawing those facts to his attention, but I have yet to receive a response. I hope that the Bill will prevent such occurrences from happening again.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I support the amendment and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). These are important matters that cause great concern in Dorset.

My hon. Friend was right to say that it is unlikely that any responsible party represented in the House would adopt the suggested tactics, but that does not mean that it will never happen. The Bill gives us an opportunity to close a loophole that somebody, some day, may exploit. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), when Jim Callaghan introduced descriptions of political candidates, he assured the House that it would not be abused, but it has been. One of the good things about the Bill is that it closes that loophole, which at some stage has affected all parties. I am sure that some of the practices outlined by the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) would be outlawed under the Bill.

There is a real problem, because under the additional member system there is both first past the post and the list. The logic of the system is that the list should balance and give a degree of proportionality to the choice. Any attempt to distort the proportionality within AMS would undermine it. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset was right to say that there needs to be only one distorted election and everyone will be outraged and the law will no doubt be changed, but a lot of damage could be done on that one occasion.

The key point is that the system depends on the predictability of the first-past-the-post element in AMS. People can try to distort the list side only when they take a view about the number of first-past-the-post seats they will win. Scotland and Wales have been mentioned because parliamentary constituency boundaries are being used. It is therefore possible, in advance of all elections, to take a reasonable bet—given opinion polls—about who is likely to win, for example, the 73 first-past-the-post seats in Scotland. When one takes a view on that, one can decide whether to try to distort the proportionality in the list.

A party that believes that it may take a majority of the first-past-the-post seats, but will have little dividend from proportionality in the list, may be tempted to have an alter ego party to try to give it a few extra seats. Given that AMS is less likely to lead to one party having an overall majority, there is a great temptation for a party that thinks it may affect a few seats one way or the other to try to distort the list.

A party that is dismal and deadly and does not win any first-past-the-post seats—which, in the context of the last general election, may well be my party—will rely on the list to reward it, as that is the logic of the system. There may be a temptation to distort that by reducing the chances of that party getting its fair degree of proportionality within the system.

That does not happen in the federal elections in Germany, but there are occasions with lander elections when a party takes a view about first-past-the-post seats and state parties—which are often groups of Christian Democrat business men who make it perfectly clear which party they would support—try to take more than 5 per cent. of the vote so that they get some representation in Hamburg or Lower Saxony.

[Mr. Robert Syms]

We are raising an important issue for debate. The point of registration of political parties is to try to clear up politics. That is necessary simply because we have introduced AMS. My hon. Friends have tried to point out that it is possible to try to skewer the result on a list one way or the other by an alter ego party.

In debates on devolution, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) has mentioned that one or two academic journals north of the border have started to publish articles about the new system and how it can be affected. People do not yet understand the full implications of the system. The Scottish newspapers and System 3 often get how the seats would be allocated quite wrong because they do not quite understand how the system works. In quaint academic circles, people are starting to look at how the system can be skewered.

All we are suggesting is that this matter deserves consideration. It has to happen only once, and to skewer two or three seats one way or the other, to affect the control of an assembly or a parliament, which could have a material impact on the body politic. We do not know what the Jenkins commission will come up with. I and many of my hon. Friends—indeed, colleagues on both sides of the House—will be campaigning strongly against whatever the Jenkins commission comes up with when the referendum comes along. However, the reality is that AMS is a strong possibility, as is some system with a list and some degree of first past the post. Even if that does not become a temptation in Scotland and Wales, it may start to become one for Westminster.

We raise the issues because there are real concerns that there may be some distortion. How much distortion depends on the predictability of the result under first past the post. If all the boundaries have been redrawn, we have to some extent thrown all the cards into the air, but we can predict which way a good many of the seats in Scotland and Wales will go, and that will have an impact on the proportional element in the system.

I make those points in support of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. I am sorry that I missed some of the Committee stage. I was on Select Committee business, and I am devastated that I have not taken part in the debates.

Mr. George Howarth: I feel privileged to have witnessed this debate tonight. I do not wish to cause strife between us, but the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) put forward one of the most elegant arguments I have ever witnessed in the House. In a fifteen-minute speech, he managed to convince himself that he was wrong. However, the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) was not convinced by his argument.

The debate was interesting, not least because the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) managed to reassure the hon. Member for West Dorset. The hon. Member for West Dorset indicates that he is moving in that direction, at least, and the problem that he described in great detail—which was elaborated on by the hon. Member for Poole—is most unlikely. The only pity is that, to complete the pacification of the hon. Member for West Dorset, there was not a representative of Plaid Cymru here. If there had been, we could all have gone home 20 minutes ago. I accept that the hon. Gentleman does not intend to move the matter further at this stage, and he has reserved the right to return to it in different contexts on different occasions.

I ought to refer briefly to some of the speeches. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson). I have known my hon. Friend for many years—for longer than I care to remember. We were both involved in the youth movement—that gives a fair indication of just how long ago it was—of our party. For the purposes of the argument, it is sufficient to say that, when I first met my hon. Friend, he was a student politician and I was a member of the then young socialists of the Labour party. We used to meet at conferences. My hon. Friend drove around with a group of colleagues in a minibus on the front of which was strapped an icepick, which was rather an indication of his attitude towards the supporters of Leon Trotsky. My hon. Friend continues to hold fairly robust views, which the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed managed to evoke tonight.

11.15 pm

The Bill seeks to address the situation described by hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) in his constituency in local government elections. I envisage that it will deal with that problem. In the local government elections in May, candidates in my constituency described themselves variously as real Labour and new Labour. Previously, they have described themselves as Labour and, in the literature, "(Ind)" is added in small print to show that they are somehow independent of the Labour party. On one occasion, a candidate, who was subsequently arrested, stood as a Labour Green Liberal candidate—presumably on the basis that one can have a peripatetic approach to political ideology. Once, she succeeded in getting elected but, unfortunately, her appearance in court prevented her from standing subsequently.

I use those examples merely to illustrate that there are problems in the system, but as the hon. Member for West Dorset has managed to reassure himself, there is little that I need to add on the subject.

Mr. Letwin: I am impressed by the Minister's discovering a title for new Labour that has so much more resonance. Labour Green Liberal seems to summon up almost every aspect of the current Government. I am minded to refer the matter to my right hon. Friend the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition for immediate retail.

I must admit that I had not expected the debate, late as it is, to be very much use. Charming though the Minister was throughout the Committee stage, he showed no sign of weakening in the face of argument, and I had not expected any willingness on his part to accept the amendment.

However, I was unaware that a formidable representative of the Scottish National party would be present. Still less did I imagine that he would make utterances that may or may not quite constitute the assurances that we sought, but which are certainly helpful. If the debate has produced that result it may have affected the course, in a very slight way, of British history, and for that I am duly grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has certainly contributed more to the enlightenment of the House than I managed to do in the considerable discussion of the Bill in Committee.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order for Third Reading read.

11.18 pm

Mr. George Howarth: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members for the positive and constructive way in which they contributed to our proceedings tonight and in Committee. On Second Reading, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) made it clear that the Conservative party would support the Bill in principle, while reserving his position on the details for scrutiny in Committee, and his party kept to that. A similar assurance was given by the Liberal Democrats and I can confirm that they have behaved impeccably ever since. I should add the Scottish National party to that paean of praise at this hour of the night.

The Bill was amended in Committee, which will ensure that it is an improved Bill as it leaves the House. In Committee and on Report, I had opportunities to describe how the scheme is intended to operate. I hope that, in doing so, I have been able to throw some light on the workings of the new system and to reassure right hon. and hon. Members about any concerns that they may have had.

As I said earlier, the Bill does not prevent parties from using similar words in their names, provided that that does not cause voters to be confused with an existing registered political party. In addition, existing political parties with similar names, for which there is a clear historical precedent, will be able to register in the initial stages. I do not wish to get drawn into the Liberal Democrat-Liberal party debate again, because we have discussed that too many times.

The practical arrangements for implementing the registration scheme will be the key to its success. I am pleased to say that Home Office officials will hold a meeting tomorrow with representatives, returning officers and officials from Companies house. They will consider the arrangements to be put in place to ensure that returning officers have up-to-date information on the names and emblems of registered political parties prior to an election. They will also discuss what guidance will be needed to help returning officers decide whether a candidate's description is appropriate.

The new rules are likely to lead voters to associate candidates with a registered political party, so hon. Members need not be too concerned. In some respects, the Bill is a technical measure, but it will have a positive and profound effect on an important part of the electoral process. It will provide, for the first time, a register of political parties. That is an essential requirement for the new-style additional member system of elections to the Scottish Parliament and to the National Assembly for Wales, and for the regional system of elections to the European Parliament.

The Bill will protect the names of registered political parties from misleading descriptions of candidates on ballot papers. At the same time—this is the most important point of all—it will protect the electorate from some of the sharp practices that have begun to creep into our electoral process. That is a worthy purpose.

Personal reservations have been expressed from time to time, but a key feature of the Bill is the fact that ballot papers will, for the first time, be able to show the party emblem next to the name of each candidate representing a registered party. The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) is a bit of a traditionalist in these matters, but those with poor sight, or the partially sighted, will benefit from that new development. By using its logo or emblem, each political party will have an additional means of identifying its uniqueness. In that sense, it is a positive development for the electorate.

The Bill will safeguard, modernise and improve the democratic process. It will be the better for the fact that it has support on both sides of the House.

11.22 pm

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to the Minister for his remarks. We have tried to be constructive with the Bill, but he knows that we do not welcome it with a great deal of enthusiasm.

The Bill is necessary, first, because of how the Government have legislated for changes in the elections to the European Parliament and, secondly, as the Minister just said, because of the electoral arrangements for the assembly in Wales and the Scottish Parliament. However, had the first-past-the-post system been used for elections to those bodies, registration would not have been required.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) raised another important issue: the use of misleading descriptions, impersonation and candidates seeking to deceive voters. We are not convinced that such a formal structure was needed to deal with those abuses, and in any event it would have been better to reach a formal consensus on how to proceed. It was all too rushed for that.

As it stands, the Bill is clearly not considered to be the complete answer and a great deal of discretion will remain in the hands of returning officers. Only time will tell whether the Bill is entirely adequate and satisfactory in respect of its main objective. We may have dealt with the substance of it in two Standing Committee sittings, but brevity and concise argument, which the Minister and I developed during proceedings on the Data Protection Bill and which have stood us in such good stead for this Bill, should not be taken as a ringing endorsement of, or entire agreement with, every measure. Without question, we are embarking into uncharted waters in our democratic processes. The Bill applies to all elections, which means that it will extend to local government. On balance, we agree with that, but dealing with it will be a major headache for political parties and returning officers.

The issue of names came up again tonight. The Bill allows for the registration of only one name, so I think that we shall not be allowed to register the name "Tory". It will be left to registrars to use their powers to avoid confusion and to prevent someone else from registering that word, but loopholes were identified in Committee. The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) made that point tellingly, but it has not been addressed.

Issues in respect of the Liberal Democrat party and the possible registration of the words "Liberal party" have been mentioned tonight, and I should not like to be the registrar who had to make a judgment on that; it is a minefield that will have to be picked through, and no hon. Member can be sure what the eventual outcome will be.

[Mr. Greenway]

The Secretary of State will have powers to prohibit the use of certain words, but we are still in the dark about what those words will be, and the process will be secret, not open, because applications will not be advertised.

We have had a lengthy debate about sham parties, although that issue arises because of other electoral arrangements, not the Bill. All our debates have been valuable because they have shown the extent to which it has been necessary to tease those matters out. That is not to the credit of the Bill, which remains deficient.

In respect of appeals, an important role will be placed in the hands of the Speaker's Committee. The procedure is untried and untested, yet huge responsibility will rest on its members and on the registrar, and the outcome of elections may depend on its decisions. Guidance will be given to returning officers, who are the Aunt Sallies in all this. They will be responsible for making the Bill work, and a great deal will depend on their interpretation of the legislation and on the guidance promised by the Minister. I know that, in the spirit of openness, he will consult us. We must hope that returning officers will find the arrangements satisfactory.

The Bill tries to kill two birds with one stone: the concept of registered parties in proportional representation and alternative member elections, and dealing with impersonation, an abuse that has become a growing problem in elections to the House and to other bodies. A general election will not provide the first test, however. We suspect that experience of the arrangements in the Bill gained in other elections will require us to revisit some of those issues before the first general election under the registered party system. We hope that we shall be able to do so with rather less haste.

11.28 pm

Mr. Beith: I am tempted to say to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), "Cheer up, you might win a seat or two under the proportional system that will be used in Scotland and Wales, and the Conservative party would not otherwise do so."

Mr. Letwin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Beith: So early in my remarks.

Mr. Letwin: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman, but does he accept that it is a signal mark of the principle on which Conservative Members are acting in those matters that that does not inhibit us from our objections to the proposals?

Mr. Beith: I was not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman should be inhibited, but I thought that the idea that co-operation between two other parties was producing a system under which Conservative voters might be represented in the Scottish Parliament in proportion to their numbers might introduce a note of cheerfulness—although, of course, they oppose it in principle.

We welcome the Bill, because it is a small but necessary part of the package of constitutional reforms on which we and the Labour party agreed before the general election, and put before the voters in our respective manifestos. It will enable the first national proportional representation elections in the country to take place: the European elections in June next year, and the proportional representation elections in Scotland and Wales. It will have another valuable effect: it will prevent some, although perhaps not all, confusion at elections as a result of deliberate attempts to mislead the electors. I am thinking particularly of the "Literal Democrat" problem experienced by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders).

The provision that allows party emblems to be shown on the ballot paper will help to avoid confusion from "spoiler" candidates, and will help voters with reading difficulties that embarrass them. Some people are reluctant to vote, and do not tell us why.

The Bill has another interesting feature. It is a constitutional Bill—it is about elections—but it was considered not on the Floor of the House, but in a Standing Committee. The result was good, detailed scrutiny. There is a lesson to be learnt from that. Consideration of the Scottish and Welsh Bills on the Floor of the House meant that large parts of the legislation were not debated properly. We believe that the answer lies in our debating parts of the more substantial constitutional Bills on the Floor of the House, and parts in Standing Committee. Our experience with this Bill has certainly shown that detailed scrutiny of a constitutional Bill is possible in Committee. Constitutional Bills require detailed scrutiny, just as much as—in some cases, more than—some other Bills. Their provisions can be very intricate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) played a notable part in the Bill's consideration in Committee. I was grateful for that: it was my hon. Friend's first experience in a Standing Committee and his first opportunity to lead for us on a Bill, and he discharged his responsibility very well. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay brought to the Committee his personal experience, as well as his usual skills. I think everyone will agree that the work of the Committee was useful, satisfactory and productive, although short.

I believe that the Bill has been improved, but my suggestion to the Minister that we need some kind of electoral commission is an expression of my feeling that we must return to these matters regularly. We are evolving new systems, and we are trying to modernise our electoral system in many regards. The Minister chairs a Committee that considers many of the more detailed aspects of modernising electoral systems. It would be much better if we had a more detached, more independent body to handle some of the difficult decisions that arise; but the Bill has made a useful contribution to our democracy.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

Viagra

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

11.32 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am pleased to be able to introduce a debate on the prescribing of Viagra, although not because I think that people need any information about what it does or why there has been concern about it. I should stress at the outset that this is a serious debate about a serious problem—the potential costs of a treatment for a significant condition.

Prescription of Viagra is a recognised drug treatment for male impotence, or male erectile dysfunction; but Viagra is a new drug, which causes concern about cost. At its recent conference, the British Medical Association passed a motion based on its worries about the introduction of the drug—

"That this Meeting demands that the Government urgently reviews the mechanism for the introduction into clinical practice of newly licensed expensive drugs".

There is clearly concern about the cost, but that applies to other drugs as well.

The debate has attracted a degree of media attention. I suspect that we would not be able to get that attention if we discussed the prescribing of beta interferon, cholesterol-lowering statins or Taxol for ovarian cancer; however, the principles in regard to those drugs—as far as they go—are the same as those applying to Viagra.

However, four factors that are special to Viagra give us cause for greater interest. First, this drug has been well publicised, so, if and when it is introduced into the NHS, it will not be possible to do so quietly and without patients or those who feel they could benefit from it knowing about it. Secondly, there is potential for demand to be for a quasi-recreational use of the drug.

The third special factor is that some—perhaps the majority—of the people who feel that they could benefit from the drug are not already being treated by the NHS for the condition, as may be the case with the other drugs I mentioned. The fourth thing that is special about Viagra compared with the other drugs that cause concern because of the cost of introduction is that there are no immediately obvious down-the-line savings through the prevention of either in-patient admission or a worsening in health that would require more expensive treatment. There is also little in the way of savings from replacing existing treatment by this new drug.

Viagra is, in those senses, special, but I wanted to raise this issue because it allows us to discuss a specific example of NHS rationing probably for the first time. I should like to explore a number of false arguments about Viagra. I hope and expect that the Government will not disagree with me.

The first argument is that Viagra, if available on prescription from a GP, will blow a £1 billion hole in the NHS budget. That is certainly a fear, but although there will be an effect on drug cost pressures, a cost of £1 billion is unlikely, and it is not the figure that anyone I have spoken to who has thought about potential demand would put on it. Even if one in 10 men have a problem with erectile dysfunction, only a proportion would benefit from this treatment, and only a proportion of them would come forward for treatment. Some men are already being treated, so there would be a small cost saving if they switched to Viagra.

The second argument—it is almost a knee-jerk reaction—is that there are good reasons why Viagra should not in fact be available on the NHS. People are persuaded otherwise, however, when they realise that male erectile dysfunction is a recognised medical condition that is already treated on the NHS by injection or by implant. Many patients suffer significant psychological or even psychiatric problems, and there are strong causal associations with alcoholism, suicide and marriage breakdown.

Some of the effects and associations that I have just mentioned have significant treatment and social costs. I hope that the Minister will agree that, in a philosophical sense, most definitions of health include reference to adequate function of all organs of the body, without discrimination, and the ability to perform most functions, without discrimination, that people and professional doctors would consider to be normal.

The third argument is that there are good clinical and cost reasons for prescribing this drug only through hospital consultants. Many people think that the Government are seriously considering that. It is right to give the matter serious consideration, but there are no strong arguments for doing so. Although some patients suffering from impotence see urologists, GPs are more than capable of treating male erectile dysfunction with existing treatments, and are also capable of establishing who needs the treatment as opposed to who demands it.

Unlike powerful cardioactive drugs, Viagra does not have a particularly complex pharmacology with particularly complex interactions. It does not have a difficult or unusual mode of delivery, unlike beta interferon by injection. It does not have difficult outcome measures, or difficult-to-measure outcome measures. Altogether, it seems suitable for primary care prescribing. It would be ludicrous to clog up hospitals with such patients in view of the high work load of urologists and the shortage of urologists to carry it out, including important waiting list procedures.

The cost of a hospital appointment is higher than a general practitioner consultation, and in some specialties secondary referral automatically brings expensive investigations. The only point of consultant-only prescription might be to reduce take-up for financial reasons, but that would be a distortion of the clinical gate-keeping role of primary care. Other hospital-only drugs are generally much more expensive per dose. They include beta interferon and are for patients, such as those with multiple sclerosis, who are already under the care of a consultant. Such patients would be expected to be under the care of, known to, or in touch with, a hospital neurologist.

There is thus a powerful case for treating Viagra, if and when it is licensed, in the same way as any other relatively safe or assumed-to-be-safe and effective oral medication for a recognised medical conditions. That would make it prescribable on the NHS in general practice. A decision not to do that would require the Government to justify the decision.

Nevertheless, a decision to allow GP prescribing of Viagra would have significant cost effects for some of the reasons that I have given, and there is also the cost

[Dr. Evan Harris]

of the treatment itself. In addition, the cost effects will be even more apparent to professionals in the service, which is why the GP committee of the British Medical Association is particularly worried now that drug budgets for GPs are to be cash limited at practice or primary care group level. There is a thus a likelihood that the new treatment will make rationing decisions in the NHS more likely, more obvious to professionals and to patients and the public generally.

I call upon the Government to come clean about the word "rationing". It inevitably exists in the NHS because of a mismatch between resources and demand. I do not place any particular value on rationing: I use it to describe the mismatch. For example, long waits for elective treatment are a form of rationing. Curative treatment is delayed, and that means that some people will never have it because they may die or become inoperable. Treatments such as in vitro fertilisation, beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, cholesterol lowering statin drugs to prevent heart disease, and taxol for ovarian cancer are available only on the NHS in some areas under what has been called post-code rationing.

Alternatively, they are cash-limited on a first-come, first-served basis. That means that known specific treatments may not be available, although in a population sense they were shown to be effective, and that is a form of deprivation of treatment. An even better example is the fact that NHS dentistry has effectively been rationed because it has been privatised away.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I appreciate that this is the hon. Gentleman's Adjournment debate, but its title is "Prescribing Viagra", and he must relate his speech much more specifically to that. He is getting into the realms of NHS dentistry and rationing in general.

Dr. Harris: Thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was merely seeking, as I hope the Minister and you will understand, to show that Viagra causes problems in terms of rationing.

On the issue of prescribing Viagra, the Government will be forced to be explicit and to start a public debate. People will not understand that a treatment is not available on the NHS. It will mean that patients who cannot afford private treatment will not be able to obtain effective treatment for male erectile dysfunction, which is a recognised medical problem. That would be a return to pre-NHS days when the poor could not get the same treatment as other people.

Until recently, all Governments have refused to accept that for drugs such as Viagra rationing exists. As such drugs, of which Viagra is the best example, come on stream, people will ask for them and will expect a reason for their non-availability in their postcode area. Already the Minister has accepted, in answer to a Liberal Democrat question at oral questions, that there is a postcode lottery of some treatments. That is to be welcomed, as we need a public debate on the matter.

If the public who may need Viagra or other treatments are to make informed decisions about the resources that they want allocated to the NHS to allow those treatments to be prescribed, they must be told what they will get from the NHS in return for the taxes that they pay. I would argue, and I believe that this was the fear of the BMA when it debated Viagra, that the amount of resources in the NHS—6.9 per cent. of gross national product—will not be sufficient to pay the full costs of prescribing such drugs, without something else having to give.

I hope that the Government will not—as they have done with other treatments, perhaps by default rather than by design—pass on the responsibility for denying patients on cost grounds treatments such as Viagra to doctors, nurses or even managers; just as doctors who do not prescribe a drug because it is clinically unnecessary would not seek to blame that clinical decision on the Government. The problems relating to the prescribing of Viagra give the Government an opportunity to set out to the public that what they get is what they pay for, and to make rationing on cost grounds much more explicit, for this drug and other treatments.

The minimum that I ask the Minister to do is to start a public debate on rationing, so that the public can recognise that what they put into the NHS is what they get out. The Liberal Democrats have for that reason proposed a standing conference to remove the party political element from debates about the prescribing of expensive new drugs. I hope that the Minister will take that into consideration in his response.

11.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing this important debate. The subject that he has chosen, Viagra, has produced more comment than any other new drug in living memory, and probably more bad jokes as well. It is already a cause celebre and, as he rightly says, it raises some important issues, not least because Viagra has prompted a huge debate about its potential impact on the national health service. I shall take this opportunity to set out the Government's position on Viagra and, more generally, on the issues that it brings in its wake.

May I make one thing clear from the outset? The NHS is a national health service, not a national happiness service, to borrow a phrase from a recent article in *The Sunday Telegraph*. If Viagra is to be available on prescription, it will be [illegible] as a potentially serious drug addressing a genuine clinical condition for some patients. That is the context in which I propose to address the issues this evening.

I should also make it clear that the debate is in danger of running ahead of actual developments. Viagra has not even yet been licensed for use in the United Kingdom, or indeed anywhere else in Europe. At present, it is an unlicensed medicinal product in the UK. Apart from its being prescribed on a named-patient basis by a doctor, any form of retail sale or supply of Viagra is a criminal offence under the Medicines Act 1968. The Medicines Control Agency is currently investigating illegal trading and advertising activities, and will take action against traders. The MCA has also advised patients against buying Viagra through mail order, or through the internet, on health grounds.

It is true that the manufacturer of Viagra has applied to the European Medicines Evaluation Agency for a European marketing authorisation, which, if granted, would be binding on the United Kingdom. The agency

refers such applications to an expert committee that is responsible for the evaluation of medicines for human use—the Committee for Proprietary Medicinal Products. I understand that Viagra has now received a favourable opinion from that committee. The final decision on whether to grant marketing authorisation will now be taken by the European Commission after consultation with the competent authorities of the member states. The timetable for that decision is approximately one to three months.

If licensed, Viagra would, in the first instance, be available only on a doctor's prescription. It is possible that, after a period of further experience—assuming that reveals no unexpected safety problems—it could then be deregulated and made available for sale over the counter. That is not an immediate option, and would need to be subject to the most stringent safety tests, particularly bearing in mind the reports we have had from America on a number of people who have died as a result of taking Viagra.

Naturally, we have been giving serious thought to how Viagra should best be introduced into the NHS, if and when it becomes licensed for use. We have been analysing the potential number of patients and the potential costs, and we have commissioned an appraisal of the strength of evidence for clinical and cost-effectiveness.

We have also invited the Standing Medical Advisory Committee to develop guidance for the NHS on the appropriate use of Viagra. The committee, which includes the presidents of the medical royal colleges, is well placed to give such advice, and has, for instance, recently issued guidance on the use of lipid-lowering drugs.

In all this, three things need to be kept in mind. First, it is vital that any prescribing should be closely targeted on patients with genuine clinical need. As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon was hinting, Viagra is unusual, if not unique, in the scope for patients who are seeking it to use it as a recreational drug rather than for real health need. I am determined to ensure that NHS resources are not frittered away in that fashion.

Secondly, erectile dysfunction has a variety of clinical causes, and treatment is not just a question of taking a pill. It must involve a full and expert assessment and consideration of alternative or complementary forms of treatment. Indeed, the NHS currently provides a range of treatment for men with erectile dysfunction, and it is important that the introduction of Viagra—if and when that happens—does not lead to the presumption that it is a miracle cure for all impotence problems

Thirdly, the NHS—even after today's historic increase in NHS funding—does not have infinite resources, and we must ensure that funding is devoted to health needs of the greatest priority. For some patients, there is no doubt that impotence is a serious and devastating condition. However, in making our decisions on how we offer NHS treatment to them, we need to keep in mind that it is not a life-threatening condition. Many might therefore conclude that, overall, it should have a relatively modest priority for NHS funding.

Weighing up all those factors—the evidence on clinical and cost effectiveness and the needs of individual patients while keeping a reasonable view on priorities—is a complex affair, involving a range of competing judgments. At the moment, decisions on how new treatments are introduced into the NHS, whether they be drugs, interventions or new devices, are taken more or less on an ad hoc basis, usually at local rather than national level.

The result is twofold. First, we have the worst of all possible worlds with some proven treatments being introduced too slowly into the NHS and others, that are unproven—either on clinical or cost grounds—being introduced too quickly. Secondly, local decision-making about access to treatments can be extremely variable. The result is what many describe as a lottery in care, with unacceptable variations in access within what is supposed to be a national health service.

That is why the Government have decided to set up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, to produce clear, authoritative guidance to the NHS on which treatments work best for which patients and which do not. The result will be greater national consistency, based on better informed clinical judgments.

The national institute will bring together the work currently scattered over many disparate bodies to benefit patients in two ways. First, treatments with good evidence of clinical and cost-effectiveness will be actively promoted, so that patients will have faster access to treatments that are known to work. Secondly, and conversely, treatments that are supported by inadequate evidence will not be widely disseminated unless further research shows that, on balance, they are an effective use of resources.

For a drug such as Viagra, the national institute would need also to advise on how such treatments should best be targeted to ensure that the most appropriate patients are selected for treatment, and that NHS resources overall are used in the most effective possible way.

Decisions on Viagra, however, will not be able to wait for establishment of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence. As I said, the Standing Medical Advisory Committee has been asked to develop guidance for the NHS on the role of Viagra. Clear guidance, properly monitored, will ensure that the availability of Viagra on the NHS is consistent across the whole country—should it be licensed.

I should expect guidance to emphasise the need for a full and expert clinical assessment before patients are prescribed Viagra, especially when there is no previous history of related disease or diagnosis of impotence. I should expect also that such assessments will take place under the auspices of expert hospital clinicians rather than through family doctors. Clearly the implications for specialist hospital services will have to be properly assessed before final decisions are taken, but I think that it is right to make it clear now that the Government do not want GPs to be burdened with the weight of expectations that have been built up around the drug.

Dr. Harris: I should be grateful if the Minister will return to an earlier point, and explain how, if the drug is licensed and available, general practitioners—regardless of whether their decisions are checked by a hospital consultant—should deal with the problem of having to tell some patients that the drug budget is insufficient to provide them with the treatment that they need. Such a problem currently exists, and it may well be exacerbated.

[Dr. Harris]

Does he not believe, as I asked him earlier, that the Government have a duty to be explicit about those matters?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman could have made a good point, but he has made a bad one—as he did in his speech, when he said that drug budgets would be cash-limited. As we have repeatedly made it clear—he should understand this point; to be fair to him, he understands health issues—no part of the new unified budgets being made available to primary care groups is to be artificially capped. Indeed, we are removing the cap.

It will be for GPs, community nurses and others to decide how best to use available resources as a totality for the benefit of the individual patient. GPs have not previously had that ability, and they will welcome it. It will be a boon. It may well lead to increased GP expenditure on drugs, or on hospital referrals or other investigations. It will be for general practitioners to make those choices. It is simply wrong to suggest that GPs will be placed in the position of having to turn away patients because of an artificially capped drugs budget. The hon. Gentleman knows that that is wrong.

Dr. Harris: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. The point that I was attempting to make—I shall try to make it differently this time—was that health authorities are already faced with prioritisation, or deprioritisation, issues relating to expensive drugs. They have to decide which drug treatments they can or cannot support.

Under the new system, responsibility for many services that are decided at primary care group level will—just as health authorities are struggling with the issue of the totality of available resources—be transferred to general practitioners. Therefore, the question that the British Medical Association and commentators such as the King's Fund still require the Minister to answer is how they should deal with the problem of expectations exceeding demand when the Government imply that the resources are available.

Mr. Milburn: If the King's Fund cannot read the White Paper or the quality consultation document paper that we have issued in the past few days, I wonder where all its money goes. What we are proposing is perfectly clear: the Government, in conjunction with the clinical professions, will take more responsibility than ever before to ensure greater consistency across the national health service and will, for the first time, do what no Government—Labour or Tory—have ever done, which is to ensure proper national standards across the NHS. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would recognise and welcome that.

As I have already said, Viagra has not yet been licensed, and the Government are keeping the issue under review. I conclude by saying four things. First, the Government accept that, for some patients, impotence is a significant clinical condition, for which effective treatment may legitimately be provided on the national health service. Secondly, depending on the decisions in the European licensing process, Viagra may be confirmed as an effective treatment for some patients, but, thirdly, treatment should be prescribed only following a full clinical assessment and as part of an integrated plan of clinical management.

Fourthly, and finally, I am determined, as are the Government as a whole, to ensure that NHS resources are safeguarded for those with real clinical need.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 July 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

British Council

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.34 am

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I am pleased to be able to talk about a subject that is of great interest to many hon. Members on both sides of the House: the work and prospects of the British Council. I have the privilege to be one of the council's vice-chairmen, the other being the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt). The council has always had a vice-chairman from each of the major political parties, and we recently welcomed a Liberal Democrat to the board.

For more than 60 years, successive Governments have greatly valued the work of the British Council. There have been ups and downs, but that remarkable organisation has been central to Britain's presentation around the world. If Britain is to be a successful world player, Government-to-Government links and formal diplomatic relations must be complemented by people-to-people contacts and cultural relations. The country is fortunate to have two distinct strings to its overseas diplomatic bow, the mission and the British Council.

This week, copies of the annual report for 1997–98 will be distributed to hon. Members. The report sets out the purpose of the British Council, which dates back to its royal charter. That purpose is to promote a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom as a forward-looking and dynamic democracy, and to advance the use of the English language. Drawing on the country's intellectual capital and immense creativity, we reinforce its positive role in the international community through cultural, scientific, technological and educational co-operation. The British Council works with partners in the United Kingdom and overseas to build long-term relations with people and institutions in other countries. They value mutual benefit, basing their relationships on openness and excellence in all that they do. I hope that hon. Members will have time to study the annual report.

The British Council now employs nearly 5,000 staff in 230 offices in 109 countries. The English language is a major cultural asset: it is the language of business, of diplomacy and of science. English language teaching is a major British export. Many organisations teach English overseas, but the British Council is unique in being able to combine a global network of centres that teach English to the highest standards. Last year, the council taught 1.1 million class hours in its 127 teaching centres worldwide. At any one time, more than 130,000 students are learning English in those self-supporting centres.

Through the centres, the council provides a shop window for English educational excellence; but the impact of its teaching extends far beyond the classroom. Many students are the opinion formers of the future, and will go on to assume positions of influence in their own countries. Many more will visit Britain on business, on holiday, to study here or to contribute to Britain's share of the increasingly significant international education market, which is estimated to be worth £7 billion a year. It was because of concern for east Asian students that, in March, the Government—with a significant financial contribution from the British Council of £300,000—announced their one-year scholarship scheme to help students from Malaysia, Korea, Thailand and Indonesia who were suffering and whose courses were in jeopardy.

English language teaching has been vital in promoting British interests, and continues to flourish. Let me now deal, however, with another area of the British Council's activities, with which I was particularly engaged in my previous role as Secretary of State for National Heritage.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the right hon. Lady agree that one of the most important things that the British Council can do for the emerging democracies is to link them with our educational qualifications and examinations system? Is that not one of the issues that the council will take up, especially in such countries as Russia? Russian qualifications need to be comparable with qualifications across the world if Russia's young people and, indeed, adults are to move into other economies and democracies to work and to live.

Mrs. Bottomley: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments. Qualifications provide a passport to further opportunities, and it is vital that they should be internationally recognised. As in so many other areas, the British Council's contribution provides a quality standard and an assurance of integrity. That is often valued by countries seeking to provide universally recognised qualifications and standards.

The British Council's cultural diplomacy has been influential. When I visited Japan in 1996, I discovered that the William Morris exhibition from the Victoria and Albert museum was likely to have as many visitors in Tokyo as it had in London. The same is true of the great exhibitions from the British museum. Cultural activities provide a platform for sympathetic interest in and respect for Britain. Sir Geoffrey Cass gave a splendid account of the contribution of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Tokyo in opening the doors for commerce and further profitable relationships.

Also in Japan, the festival UK 98 is a year-long programme of celebratory events, managed by the British Council and the embassy, including conferences, art exhibitions and, importantly, a focus on science education. Concentrating on science as well as the arts and English language teaching will produce further developments. Our distinguished new director, Dr. David Drewry, has a scientific background and will meet with a great deal of respect in an area in which Britain has an established position and where it will benefit from collaboration around the world.

By establishing Britain as a creative, dynamic and productive nation, we have been able to change people's traditional perceptions of our country. Much comment has

[Mrs. Bottomley]

been made about the "Cool Britannia" tag. If that means rubbishing the past and thinking only of the future, it is not appropriate for Britain, but the message that Britain is an exciting country with talent and creativity is important. In my previous role as Secretary of State for National Heritage, I established a committee involving the Department for National Heritage—now the Department for Culture, Media and Sport—the British Council and the British Tourist Authority. That committee is moving forward. I am pleased that the British Council is represented on the Government's new Panel 2000. If we want to present ourselves in our best light, holding on to our creativity is enormously important.

That message has been reflected in other exhibitions. At the Venice biennale, Rachel Whiteread won a Premio 2000 for best young artist. Stanley Spencer's reputation has been established in America thanks to the British Council. The royal national theatre has achieved great acclaim among the public and senior politicians in China. There are many examples of how the British Council has changed people's attitude to Britain. The hon. Member for Leicester, West may say more about the important New Images programme in Australia. She is better qualified to talk about that than I am.

On a recent visit to Hong Kong, the Foreign Affairs Committee was struck by the importance of the British Council, its impressive new accommodation, its library and its continuing significant role in the changing situation there.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I had the privilege of being on that visit to the British Council in Hong Kong. It is one of the finest operations that I have seen. I speak as a bit of a British Council addict. I was particularly impressed by the links with young people. The place was packed at half-past 5 that evening, in contrast to some of the other places that the right hon. Lady and I have visited, where we are not reaching out in the same way.

Mrs. Bottomley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. His support for the British Council is well recognised and appreciated. The approach of the offices is to reach as many people as possible, including the new generation. Many of the European networking programmes are trying to pick up the leaders of the future and influence them while they are still impressionable, so that they have a lasting trust and interest in Britain. We want to play a significant part in the development of nations around the world.

I spoke of Sir Geoffrey Cass's account of the RSC's contribution to promoting Britain in Tokyo and the United States. The work of the British Council has an increasing significance and impact in advancing the Government's human rights agenda. The production of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" in Poland under the authoritarian regime is a reminder of the power of the arts and their role in supporting those under oppression and tyranny. We can be confident that there will be increasing emphasis on that with the appointment of our new chairman, Baroness Kennedy, who is a distinguished international lawyer.

On a recent visit to Kenya and Uganda, the Foreign Affairs Committee sub-group was impressed by the human rights work of the British Council. We met a lawyer, Mr. Juma Kiplenge, who had been under threat in Kenya. He is on Amnesty International's list of vulnerable people who need to be kept hold of. The British Council arranged for him to go on a scholarship programme to Newcastle, where the college of law has formed a long-term relationship with him and his human rights group. He now has the protection of international publicity and the support of colleagues in Britain thanks to the strategic intervention of the British Council.

The British Council is also using the Foreign Office's human rights projects fund. That is an important development. I welcome the fact that the British Council has been able to manage so many programmes, including an advocacy campaign for children—I was able to open the children's rights exhibition. The British Council has an excellent network of decision makers and opinion formers—the people from whom change will best be achieved for the development of civil society. The British Council is often pivotal.

The Foreign Affairs Committee met the Kenyan branch of the International Federation of Women's Lawyers, which promotes access to the law for women. The British Council has been involved in civic education workshops there, drawing attention to the importance of the role of Members of Parliament. The chairman of the human rights committee was able to visit a UK human rights seminar to strengthen his position on his return home. The House will recognise many areas of activity that are supported and valued.

The nature of the comprehensive spending review and uncertainty about the future have meant sensitive times for the British Council. I am pleased that this debate is taking place today, when much of the uncertainty has been brought to an end. The council is relieved that there will be a small increase in its funding over the next three years. That is a Government endorsement, although the increase is modest and the council remains stretched. With the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it will need to look strategically at priorities, focusing resources on countries and activities of most importance to British foreign policy. The fact that funding is secure for three years is undoubtedly a step forward. However, there will not be money for new work, to invest in buildings or for information technology. I hope that, in such areas, the Minister can find new sources to which the British Council can have access, so that it can play its full part in presenting Britain and promoting the human rights agenda and foreign policy objectives. Economic activities have suffered as a result of the strong pound and the Asian economic crisis, and that has put pressure on the council.

Part of the funding—grant in aid—has been moved from the Department for International Development to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which makes sense for administrative reasons. I should like the Minister to take up the cudgels on behalf of the British Council in one area. A policy change at the DFID has meant that, over the past year, there has been a 71 per cent. reduction in project work money. In 1996–97, it amounted to £84.6 million; in 1997–98, it was reduced to £24.9 million. The reduction has been widely investigated. In summary, it seems that there was knee-jerk hostility among the new regime at the DFID to the use of consultants. I ask the Minister and his colleagues to consider whether the policy can be softened. It is well understood that the donor club approach can have merits, but with such a dramatic reduction in the

amount of money that goes to British Council projects, the British Council's presence and ability to intervene, particularly in Asia and in parts of Africa, will be substantially reduced.

British Council project work comes with great integrity, authority and respect. Its work is done by establishing partners in different countries. Policy is ill judged if it cannot be moderated. I do not believe that, initially, the DFID intended to have such a savage effect on the British Council. If there is no amelioration, hindsight will show that great damage has been done to the British Council's work. I contrast that with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights projects fund, which has resulted in great benefits. The British Council is determined that it will continue to work for the future within available resources, although, undoubtedly, it will continue to knock on Departments' doors. It will also continue to work more broadly with the partners that it has so successfully established.

It is only right for me to pay the warmest tribute to the two leaders who have ensured the British Council's success over the past six years. The chairman, Sir Martin Jacomb, who is to retire next month, has been a source of great wisdom, expertise and judgment in taking the British Council forward. He has been a profound believer in the need to enhance the UK's presence around the world and a very positive advocate of a partnership approach, building links with business and the wider community, as well as with Governments and the academic arts community.

Sir John Hanson, the first director general to be appointed from within the British Council, who retired earlier this year, saw the expansion of the council's presence from 133 overseas offices to 230 today. He overhauled many of the organisation's important internal workings, and was particularly involved in promoting the British arts overseas. For many other reasons, the House and the country are indebted to both those distinguished leaders. I also pay tribute to British Council staff, who move from country to country, taking their expertise, knowledge and commitment to Britain and Britain's interests around the world.

We have seen change; we shall see change again. The British Council is an institution of which we can be proud. In focusing more on science, human rights and Britain's creative role around the world, we should not lose touch with our founding principles. I welcome the fact that so many hon. Members want to contribute to today's debate. I hope that they all continue to be advocates, friends and supporters of the British Council.

9.55 am

Ms Patricia Hewitt (Leicester, West): I congratulate the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), my fellow vice-chair of the British Council, on securing this debate and on opening it with such an admirable summary of the British Council's extraordinary and far-ranging work. Like her, I was delighted to be invited towards the end of last year to take up the post of one of the vice-chairs.

I had the good fortune last summer, when I was in Australia, of taking part in one of the conferences attached to the New Images programme—a year-long event organised by the British Council in Australia, designed to change and modernise the attitude of Australians towards the mother country, as it used to be known, and of those in this country towards Australia. Speaking as—I believe—the only citizen of both Australia and Britain to be a Member of this House, I know that those attitudes certainly needed updating.

Research carried out by the British Council at the beginning of the New Images programme suggested that young Australians in particular saw Britain as a class-divided society; as a musty old country steeped in tradition, with serious social problems. They saw it as having weak trading relationships, and as the producer of out-of-date products. New Images, a vibrant programme not simply of conferences but of exhibitions, touring cultural projects, virtual exchanges between schoolchildren in Australia and Britain and joint projects on the internet, quite remarkably penetrated more than half the Australian population. It achieved a change in attitude and a measurable increase in the number of young Australians in particular who wanted to visit and to study in this country.

The impact was summed up by one Australian journalist, who said:

"Ye Olde Mother Country is undergoing a personality change so dramatic it's breathtaking—as if your old grandmother suddenly started wearing Gucci jump-suits".

We clearly did not get through to him completely, because, in the light of the men's fashion exhibition this week, he should have referred to Paul Smith rather than Gucci. None the less, the programme was extraordinarily striking and successful, and funded almost entirely through private sponsorship, levered in on the back of the public grant in aid that we at the council were able to contribute.

Earlier this year, with the Minister, I had the pleasure of attending the British Council's conference in Prague—a fascinating and useful opportunity to bring together not only people from this country and from the Czech Republic but people from many of the other emerging democracies, the accession countries in the new Europe.

For me, the highlight of that conference was a discussion chaired by another dual British citizen—John Tusa, himself a Briton of Czech origin—on the question of identity, and what it means to be British in an increasingly multicultural and diverse country. For me, to have the opportunity to hold that discussion in a country and a city undergoing such an extraordinary change in its own identity was an admirable example of how the British Council not only contributes through relationship-building to the development of stronger democracies abroad, but learns from that participation and co-operation with people whose experience is so different from our own.

An exhibition took place in India towards the end of last year as part of our contribution to the celebration of 50 years of independence—"The Enduring Image" exhibition of treasures from the British museum, which was opened by Her Majesty the Queen in October. That exhibition was of particular interest to many of my constituents, for whom India is their mother country and second home. It brought a different facet of Britain to a country with which we have such a long and close relationship, and was ranked by Indian commentators as among the best of the cultural events during the 50th anniversary year.

As the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey said, the British Council has an extraordinary capacity to complement the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth

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Office and our diplomatic missions overseas. It is the Heineken of British foreign policy; it reaches the parts that other bodies cannot reach.

In some of the ways that I have described, we help to promote the reality, not simply the image, of a modern, dynamic, creative Britain. Especially in our work on human rights, we support the Government's ethical foreign policy stance. We promote values that are of enduring importance.

I must mention in particular the council's work on gender issues. We have been instrumental in helping to promote and enhance the position of women politicians and potential women leaders in many parts of the world. For instance, in September 1997 we arranged a high-level two-day meeting in Cairo for women Members of Parliament from this country and their counterparts and colleagues from Egypt, east Jerusalem, Lebanon, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan. That enabled them to learn from our experience and us to learn from their experience, and enabled us all to help to devise effective strategies for developing women's position in countries in which they face particular difficulties.

Reema Hamami, head of the masters programme in gender development and law at Birzeit university, has said:

"One of the great strengths of the British Council in East Jerusalem is that it responds to local needs instead of imposing pre-selected frameworks. The Council has been an important supporter of work for gender equity and the promotion of gender-legislation, development of local capacity and the integration of gender as a fundamental component in the development process."

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has repeatedly stressed that it is vital and central to any effective development strategy that we invest in the capacity and the abilities of women as well as men in developing countries.

I must also mention the council's work in promoting the English language and "education, education, education". One way in which we do that, complementing the English language teaching referred to by the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey, is through our extraordinary network of libraries and computer centres throughout the world.

I have had the pleasure of visiting the library in Prague, although, unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), I have not yet had the chance to see what I understand is a most impressive building in Hong Kong. Such libraries provide a resource for people in the 109 countries in which we operate, and people can walk in off the street—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not like to interrupt the hon. Lady's admirable speech, but is it necessary for those pagers to go off so loudly in the House of Commons? Are Labour Members sounding a little off-message?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): The noise sounds more like a Black and Decker drill than a pager. We shall have it investigated.

Ms Hewitt: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): It is a bit early for the vibration.

Ms Hewitt: I should be delighted to lend the hon. Gentleman my pager, if he would like to experience its delicate low-tone vibration for himself.

Mr. MacShane: That is an offer to take up—[HON. MEMBERS: "He is getting over-excited."] We shall have to give him a Viagra pill as well.

Ms Hewitt: May I return to slightly more serious business, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Rowlands: I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but she mentioned the facilities in Prague. I visited those before the fall of the old regime, and the role of the British Council at that time in making connections with information and with individual citizens, who often ran great risks in getting access to our library facilities, was most memorable.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving that example, because when I was in Prague it was clear that we had been able to build on those relationships, which were established before the change of regime.

I can give another example—from Indonesia, which has recently undergone appalling economic and political turmoil. When the British Council reopened our office and library there after a period of enforced closure, in the first three hours 400 people came in to get back into contact with the outside world through the English language and the British Council resources. That is another wonderful example of the people-to-people relationships that we can construct.

The British Council has now established a website, which receives more than 1 million visits a month. I urge right hon. and hon. Members who have not yet visited it to do so. It is a comprehensive website which acts as a virtual gateway to Britain for millions of people throughout the world.

The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey also talked about finance and administration. Two years ago, we had the misfortune to undergo substantial cuts in the British Council budget, but they were entirely absorbed within the United Kingdom operation; they did not fall upon the overseas operation. As a result of that painful and difficult process, we are now confident—and our confidence is upheld by independent audit—that we are running the most efficient possible operation.

We are a public-private partnership in action. The grant in aid that we receive from the Foreign Office—and which, until the comprehensive spending review, we also received from the Department for International Development—is more than matched by the funds that we raise and earn through our own trading in services and enterprise.

Like the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey, I regret the fact that changes in the way in which the Department for International Development is organising its programme support to developing countries have produced a sharp downturn in the Department's demand for our services, particularly for project management

services in parts of Africa, the middle east and India. Those changes result from the shift in development philosophy—which began before the election—away from specific projects, which require project management, towards sector development programmes in partnership with the recipient Governments.

I hope that, in the new development world, there will still be a real need for the expertise that the British Council has brought to bear through the services that we have offered in international development for several years—even if, in future, those services are delivered through recipient Governments, rather than brokered through the Department.

In particular, I warmly welcome the settlement for the British Council announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the comprehensive spending review statement yesterday. It is immensely welcome. The British Council had been planning for a standstill budget—that is to say, a cash-limited budget that would stand still in money terms but fall in real value. Had that been the situation, we would have had to start cutting into programmes in other parts of the world. That threat no longer faces us.

Instead, we have not just the inflation-proofing of our budget, but more than £5 million of new money over the next three years. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has said, that is welcome and will enable the council to retain and build on its extraordinarily valuable work. It will not permit, as my right hon. Friend rightly said, investment in our estate, buildings and information technology, which badly need modernising. I hope that the Minister will indicate that he and the Department would look on it favourably if the British Council were to come forward with a proposal to fund that necessary capital expenditure through a formal public-private partnership. It seems to be admirably fitted for that approach, and I hope that it will be taken.

Following the comprehensive spending review, we know what the budget will be for the next three years. We know also that the Foreign Office wishes to focus its activities, both geographically and in terms of theme. It is vital that the British Council and its leadership engage in a dialogue with Ministers and with the FCO, to look at how we focus our work around the world. We want to ensure that we do everything as superbly as we currently do the best of our work.

The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey referred to the new leadership at the British Council. Like her, I pay tribute to the director and the chairman—who have retired or are about to do so—and to our new chair, the noble Baroness Kennedy, and our new director, Dr. David Drewry. The new leadership, in a closer and effective partnership with Ministers and our sponsoring Department, will be able to ensure that, for many years to come, the British Council continues as it has done for the past 60 years—to promote the best of Britain to the rest of the world.

10.13 am

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): My hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), a member of the board of the British Council, apologises for being unable to stay for the whole of the debate owing to Defence Committee business.

Two years ago, I probably knew about as much about the British Council as the average member of the British public—I had heard of it, but was unsure what it did. Then I was asked to help train women in Jordan who were potential parliamentary candidates. The event was run by the British Council, in conjunction with the Jordanian national forum for women. Among other things, it involved campaign training—on a purely non-partisan basis—discussions on the role of the free press in a democracy and the importance of scrutiny to ensure a fair and free election system. There were about 60 Jordanian women involved, and they learned a great deal from the five-day workshop. I also learned a great deal about the country and the people of Jordan, and about the respect and affection with which the British Council is regarded in other countries.

I want to concentrate on the importance of the British Council's work on gender issues, which has been referred to by the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt). I wish to touch on that because of my personal experience working for the British Council, and also because I know of the importance that the Government attach to gender equality and to Britain's responsibilities arising from the Beijing declaration. Women's access to decision making and their legal rights are at their forefront of the British Council's work in social development worldwide. The British Council is also keen to make a significant contribution towards the battle against domestic violence.

In the past three years, 3,000 women campaigners and politicians world wide have received training through the British Council. In Nigeria, for example, that has led to 100 women forming a cross-party movement to get more women into Parliament. It would be interesting if we could emulate that in this country and have a cross-party movement from within Parliament to continue the work done by the 300 Group. In Nepal, the British Council provides police training in gender sensitivity and the handling of domestic violence, combined with radio broadcasts to increase women's awareness of their legal rights.

The British Council plays a key role in helping to secure respect and influence for Britain. It works with those who take decisions and shape opinions, or with those who will be future leaders of their country as well as with others within the country. However, the work involves not just countries overseas but organising and facilitating visits of policymakers to Britain. For example, in April this year, eight Spanish Government officials—all women—came here to study British methods of dealing with domestic violence, as we are generally seen as a leading country in handling the problem.

In the past year, the British Council has used two vehicles to promote gender equality in Kuwait. With the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it has adopted a women-only policy in the selection for Chevening scholarship awards. Some of us were privileged to meet one of the Chevening scholarship people at a recent lunch held by the British Council in the House. It has also sponsored a focus on health care for women. Other gender-based work has taken place in Israel, the Palestine territories, Egypt and Mexico, among other countries.

The hon. Member for Leicester, West mentioned a high-level meeting of Anglo-Arab women Members of Parliament in Cairo last year. I am sure that the delegation from the Arab counties was high-level. Looking at

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the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) and myself, I am not sure whether others would think that the delegation from Britain was quite so high-level in terms of access to decision-making.

Mr. Soames: I don't know about that.

Jackie Ballard: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I was hoping for such an interruption. That fascinating two-day meeting was designed to plan strategies to enhance women's participation in politics, but also to foster greater understanding between Britain and the Arab world.

If I have a criticism of the British Council, it is that it does not do enough to publicise its existence or its work to British parliamentarians or to the British people. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) on securing this debate, which I hope will solidify the Government's support for the British Council and help to increase public awareness of its role as an integral part of Britain's international effort.

10.18 am

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Two things make me very proud when I am travelling overseas: the British Council and the BBC World Service. Those two outstanding external forces are the best in the world, and we should be proud of them. I, too, have visited many British Council offices, especially in the middle east, and I pay tribute to the office in Gaza—a desperate place at the moment—where the council does an extraordinary job in the community, both in arranging cultural exchanges and in teaching English.

I have a few thoughts for the Minister. Is he confident that the name British Council rings true in its representation of a vibrant country? The word council is academic and intellectual; it gives the wrong impression. Will he consider whether the name is appropriate as we go forward into the 21st century?

There are five deposit libraries in the United Kingdom, including the great British library, but there could be a sixth—a virtual library for the British Council. It would cost very little money; it could be either the British library's on-line service or the council's own virtual library of books and magazines, which could be electronically delivered round the world. One notices a disparity in the number of books between the various offices and a lack of books in English—some of the history books were written in the 1950s. A modern on-line service in every centre would be sensational, and would not cost us much.

Given the recent soccer world cup and the fact that FIFA has more members than the United Nations, will the Minister reflect on how little the British Council uses sport, despite the fact that it is a great international language? I pay tribute to the Penguins international rugby club, which I know well and of which I am a member. It will be 40 years old next year and has made 56 overseas tours—it is currently touring Chile and Brazil. It always pays its way and always sends coaches into schools to sell the game of rugby union. We could use the council to help our football world cup bid for 2006 or our Olympics bid for 2012. We do not utilise the great sports, many of which were created in this country.

10.21 am

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), I do not have the advantage of having seen the most recent annual report of the British Council, so my starting point in examining its role and leadership—I shall touch on its relevance to an ethical foreign policy—is the 1996–97 annual report, which states:

"The purpose of the British Council is to promote a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom and the English language and to encourage cultural, scientific, technological and educational co-operation between the United Kingdom and other countries . . . The Foreign and Commonwealth Office . . . is the Council's sponsoring Department."

The report later stresses that members of the board

"must be British citizens . . . chosen from among those who occupy positions of recognized eminence in British educational, professional and cultural life . . . Appointment to the offices of Chairman, Deputy Chairman and Vice-Chairman require the approval of the Foreign Secretary."

A recent publication, "The British Council in Russia", refers to the fact that the British Council lists among its "main priorities" the promotion of "democratic values" and of

"Russia's transition to a market economy".

Who is to be at the head of this multi-million pound, taxpayer-funded exercise in the export of democracy and market-oriented values? Hon. Members have referred to Baroness Kennedy, about whom I want to make some remarks. I have written to inform her that I would be doing so, and I shall not refer to anything that has not been published or stated openly in the press.

When it was announced that Baroness Kennedy would be appointed as chairman of the British Council, the new director general, David Drewry, said:

"This is a great opportunity for the Council and Helena's impressive track record and leadership qualities will help us enormously in projecting Britain's strengths worldwide."

On 21 April, the *Financial Times* described Baroness Kennedy as a

"Blairite lawyer and human rights activist".

It predicted:

"Her appointment is likely to reinforce the role of the British Council in the government drive to 're-brand' the image of Britain which, in her words, 'is no longer of men of a particular class'. The impact of the Blairite baroness, who gained her peerage last year, is likely to be most felt in the human rights work of the Council which arranges exchanges of lawyers with foreign countries."

An intriguing profile by Harriet Swain in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* of 22 May stated that Baroness Kennedy

"has become a symbol of a feisty woman, determined to expose the anachronisms of this country's institutions, and a heroine for the underprivileged."

It explained:

"She has worked her way into many of this country's most powerful institutions from a standing start, and is determined that they should become more open to the type of person she represents . . . 'You have to take an institution by the throat to get it to change,' she says. 'You have to have a radical agenda for reform.' Throughout her career, she has chosen to work at reform from the inside, and as a result has incited some criticism. Some believe"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I become very concerned when hon. Members read articles into the record. That is

not what a debate is about. The hon. Gentleman must paraphrase. Moreover, he must be careful about making personal remarks about a member of the other House.

Dr. Lewis: I thank you for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I said, I notified the noble Baroness of the remarks that I intended to make, but, given the time shortage and your advice, I shall move on.

I want to declare an interest. I used to be a consultant to a group called the Media Monitoring Unit, which investigated whether the BBC and ITV were observing the provisions for due impartiality on politically contentious subjects. During that time, I came across frequent references to Helena Kennedy, as she was then.

Ms Hewitt: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that Baroness Kennedy's appointment was made after open advertisement and an extensive search? It was made on the unanimous recommendation of the search committee of the board of the British Council. Is he also aware that, as the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) said, the British Council is not a party political body? It has been supported and valued by Governments of all parties for the past 60 years. Will he cease his slur on the noble Lady and make a valuable, rather than a tawdry, contribution to the debate?

Dr. Lewis: The hon. Lady has made her speech and she is welcome to intervene on mine if she wants. However, I am talking about the facts, which, summarised, are these: only a decade ago, Baroness Kennedy was actively involved in the International Association of Democratic Lawyers—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I make an appeal to the hon. Gentleman. The title of the debate on the Order Paper is

"The work and future prospects of the British Council",

and he should not use it as an opportunity to attack someone. He may, perhaps, do so on another occasion, but not in this debate, which was secured by his right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley). I really think that he is overstepping the mark.

Dr. Lewis: Again, I thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In a week or so, the noble Lady will head the British Council, a multi-million pound organisation, so I do not know on what occasion it would be more appropriate to point out some of the things of which the selection committees and the people who elected her unanimously were not aware. Those things I shall list briefly and then—no doubt to the delight of those hon. Members who are present—I shall conclude my remarks. Baroness Kennedy actively participated in a leading Soviet-front organisation, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers—

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Lewis: No, I will not give way any further. If hon. Members do not want me to criticise the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, they should take issue with the Labour party, which banned it as a proscribed organisation and a communist front from 1952 until 1973.

For three years in the 1980s, Baroness Kennedy chaired the Haldane Society of so-called Labour Lawyers, which is in fact the British arm of the Soviet front, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. In the early 1980s, a curious announcement appeared in the personal columns of the *Morning Star*, congratulating Helena Kennedy on the birth of her son, from the Covent Garden branch of the Communist party.

Mr. Wyatt: What is the relevance of all this?

Dr. Lewis: The relevance is simple: if we appoint someone to head an organisation promoting abroad the values of democracy, reform and the free market, as is alleged to be the case in some of the British Council's literature, past membership of communist front organisations and the British Communist party is a relevant consideration. No one mentions these things, because these days such people reinvent themselves.

Mr. Savidge: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Did the hon. Gentleman say that Baroness Kennedy was a past member of the British Communist party, and would he like to retract that?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is for me to decide whether an hon. Member is in order. The hon. Gentleman is not out of order in what he has said so far. If he is out of order, I will not be long in notifying him.

Dr. Lewis: I invite Baroness Kennedy to say to the community at large whether she now repudiates the affiliations that she had through those years of the cold war and recognises the fact that she should have had nothing to do with organisations such as the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, or whether she thinks that it is satisfactory to change her opinions and her political clothes with the fashions of the day.

I make no apology for having raised these matters. Ministers, from the Prime Minister to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, with no hesitation whatever, have raised political activities in which I was involved 20 years ago whenever I have attacked them. I am not being appointed to run an important organisation, and Baroness Kennedy is. It is right that she should disavow her disgraceful political record of support for communist organisations that supported regimes whose murderous activities left a blot on the history of the 20th century.

10.32 am

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): In another career, I spent many years working in embassies and high commissions overseas, most recently in China. In each instance I worked closely with the British Council, and especially in China, because, by Chinese regulation, the council was part of the embassy and operated from the same building. Wherever I served, everyone to whom I talked saw the council in the most positive light.

It is commonplace to say so, but many of the leaders of the countries concerned studied in Britain with the council's help. Many countries have benefited from

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training provided by the council or have projects managed by the council. In appropriate places, the council has had a distinctly commercial edge to its efforts: for example, in exporting British education and training or promoting British publishing. In many places, that has been part of a collaborative, innovative effort to increase our invisible exports, and I see no harm, and much good, in that.

More recently, I worked in Manchester, where I saw the British Council in a different light: not as an administrator of aid or a manager of projects but as an important figure in the landscape and a major employer in a prestigious, purpose-built building, appropriate for the reception of foreign visitors and the promotion of the United Kingdom. The building was designed as the council's main office, if not its head office, and was part of the regeneration of Manchester and the north-west.

During my time in Manchester, I witnessed the destruction of much of the council's operations by cuts in grant in aid. The council rightly decided to take the brunt of the cuts in the United Kingdom rather than in its teeth operations overseas so a 9 per cent. cut overall became a 25 per cent. cut at home. Overall, the council has lost 40 per cent. of its staff over the past six years.

The restructuring process has left the council with buildings and information technology systems that no longer project an appropriate image of Britain. That cannot be right. Perhaps more important, the council may now be unable to exploit opportunities to develop new activities with overseas partners. The cuts left it without the ability to play to its strengths.

The public expenditure settlement was a considerable setback, but it is not the council's only problem. Grant in aid represents only a third of its income. It will be damaged further if there is a reduction in its project management role and its ability to attract contract income. It may be right to promote greater emphasis on working partnerships with overseas governments in poverty, education and health, and to lay stress on multilateral rather than bilateral aid, but there is certainly a value in aid with a UK face.

Any reduction in English language teaching has the potential to cause harm, and not only to the council. It is right and proper—and indeed expected and desired overseas—that English language teaching should be undertaken by people from the home of that language, who speak British, rather than American, English; that is of great commercial benefit to us.

It is often said that we attract inward investment because of, for example, the availability of sites, our flexible work force and our higher education, but a principal factor is the fact that we speak English. The investors are trained to speak English and feel comfortable in a location where English is spoken.

The British Council is lean, businesslike, disciplined, IT-based, highly professional and highly respected. Its role in human rights, governance and the promotion of women's rights is exemplary, but it needs the tools to do the job. The increased funding provided by the comprehensive spending review might not be all that it wanted, but—set against the background of prudence in financial management and the need to put money into health and education, as well as an increased aid programme—the settlement is generous and, in real terms, a grant increase. It must surely be welcomed, both absolutely and relative to what has gone before.

10.36 am

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): This seems to be a fashionable week for the Conservative party to do some mass apologising. It is not my place to apologise for the appalling speech of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), but I am sorry that the previous Government's treatment of the British Council stands as a blot on an otherwise admirable record.

Mr. Savidge *rose—*

Mr. Soames: No, I will not give way.

The previous Government failed to see what an extraordinarily powerful arm of British diplomacy the British Council could be. When I was Minister of State for the Armed Forces, I travelled extensively, especially in the middle east and in eastern Europe, and it was always a great source of pride and admiration to see the work of the British Council, often conducted on a shoestring but achieving remarkable results; for that very reason, it was a soft target. I am delighted that the present Government have given it more resources. They are slender resources when one considers the massive increases in other areas, but we should be grateful for what is, after all, a real increase.

I agree with the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), who said that, in the quiver of arms of British diplomacy, the World Service of the BBC, the British Council and defence diplomacy have a terrific part to play in tandem with Britain's largely exceptional and brilliant, but mostly unrecognised, diplomatic effort, which buys us so much more than we deserve overseas.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard), in a good and supportive speech, concentrated largely on gender-based issues. I hope that the British Council will not become a quasi-politically correct organisation, promoting overseas some of the more loopy British fairy-tale ideas of the moment. It needs to balance its efforts between presenting what is traditional and remarkable, culturally and historically, about Great Britain, and presenting our modern success and what we stand for in the world. It must not be some quasi-autonomous organisation promoting women's rights throughout the world. That has a place, but it must not take the lead in an organisation that is meant to present a balanced view of everything that this country stands for and that people overseas see in it.

Finally, the Ministry of Defence will not thank me for saying this, but, on the argument as to whether a type 23 frigate or the Royal Shakespeare company should visit a country, on some occasions the value of the former is inestimable and cannot be over-exaggerated, but, generally speaking, a visit by the latter, or any of the other great cultural institutions of this country, does more good for Great Britain overseas than almost anything else we could imagine.

10.40 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On 2 July 1935, 63 years ago, the inaugural meeting of the British Council took place in St James's palace, when the

then Prince of Wales agreed to become its patron. The chairman, Lord Tyrrell, is reported as saying that he was

"encouraged in the undertaking by a small grant from the Treasury of £6,000",

the active collaboration of six other Government Departments and generous donations from private individuals. The council used that foundation to establish the platform for later work. At the meeting, it is also reported that it had already been able to bring a party of Swedish landowners and gardening experts to this country.

I think hon. Members will agree that the British Council has made considerable progress since those early days. Its distinguished patron is Her Majesty the Queen and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) said, it can now be found in 230 towns and cities in 109 countries, helping to win for the United Kingdom a sizeable market share in the global education and training export business, while its primary role in our cultural diplomacy is unparalleled. Therefore, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment Debate on the work and future prospects of the British Council, which is particularly apposite following yesterday's spending review. I was disappointed to find only one mention of the British Council in the White Paper, which states, at page 73:

"The British Council will have a key role to play in presenting the new image of Britain."

Judging by the contributions made by hon. Members on both sides of the House today, it deserved a slightly larger mention in the document.

I shall take a few moments to highlight the variety of work carried out by the British Council and to draw on a personal example, as many hon. Members have done. I must record my thanks to the staff of the council in Oman who supported me when I visited that country as an Education and Employment Minister in my efforts to help consolidate the Omanis' adoption of the British national vocational qualifications scheme. That scheme certainly highlights one of the most successful and perhaps slightly less well-known aspects of the council's work, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said.

The NVQ and GNVQ unit in the British Council in Oman was set up in April 1995. The council had convinced the Omani Government that the way to indigenise the work force was to provide training related to future work possibilities and that the British GNVQ and NVQ system was the ideal model. GNVQs were introduced into the five technical and industrial colleges there and NVQs provided on-the-job and pre-job training. The British Council unit there offers finance training leading to qualifications offered by the Association of Accounting Technicians and the training is open to all Omanis. The council also has a contract with a large oil company to train its staff, which shows how well regarded it is. The unit also offers business administration qualifications, information technology and English language training and works with a number of companies and Government organisations, such as the Muscat municipality.

The council's NVQ unit became the first accredited overseas centre for the delivery of international management programmes within the NVQ framework. The unit is also an accredited training and development lead body centre, which means that it can act as a consultant for other training units that want to become accredited NVQ centres and can also train personnel to be trainers or assessors. Consequently, the council works closely with other Omani institutions.

The net effect is that the centre is very successful and is recognised by the Omanis as a quality operation, providing a supporting role to its indigenisation programme. The unit is also impressive because it is self-funded on a full cost-recovery basis. Since 1995, its income has increased by 300 per cent. At any one time, 400 students are being trained directly by the council, with conservative estimates putting the number benefiting indirectly from the British Council's operations at around 10,000. That is impressive and is a fine example of what can be achieved in a country with which we are proud to have such good relations.

When I was in Oman, the director was Mr. Clive Bruton, who expertly led a first-class team. He has since moved on to Nigeria, where, yet again, the varied and valuable work of the British Council can be seen in operation, this time under more adverse circumstances. The Nigerian operation is my second example. We are all hoping for the re-emergence of a stable and democratic Government in Nigeria, and the British Council is playing a significant role in engendering the conditions necessary for the realisation of that aim. For example, in March 1994, it organised a major conference on human rights, which led directly to the formulation of a common human rights curriculum for all law graduates, and to increased contacts with local human rights organisations.

The council has four priorities in that area. The first is to support those organisations that are trying to reduce corruption in Nigeria. The second is to train Nigerians in conflict management techniques, in which they have already had a notable success when, in Zangon Kataf—I hope that my pronunciation is not off beam—they managed to get opponents round a table for the first time for four years when they had been killing each other instead of negotiating. The other two priorities are to train and inform human rights workers and to assist the Nigerian Government to make the transition to democracy through assisting the training of elected officers to the local government associations and, in particular, through the training of women. I mention the latter as other hon. Members have done so and there is no doubt that, as women become more involved in the political process, the likelihood of conflict diminishes. I am sure that we would all wish British Council staff in that region and the director, Mr. Bruton, well in that vital work.

In the short time available, I have highlighted two examples of British Council work, but we know from the contributions of other hon. Members on both sides of the House about the variety of work that it carries out so successfully. When the Minister replies, I hope that he will be able to give some assurances that that and future work will not be jeopardised. I referred to the fact that the spending review White Paper only made a small mention of the British Council and I understand that there will be a small increase in its funding, but much has been made of the fact that Overseas Development Administration contracts have reduced by about 71 per cent. I hope that the fears raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey about the major drop in Department

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

for International Development contracts will give the Minister an opportunity to enlighten us on what can be done to redress that.

The Foreign Office section of the spending review contains a clear indication that certain posts will be closed to reflect this Government's new priorities. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us which will be closing and what effect that may have on the work of the British Council. Do any of the envisaged closures threaten any British Council presences? I hope that he may be able to guarantee that no posts will close and that there will be no reduction in the overseas staff. I also hope that he may have time to spend a moment on the new priorities for projecting a new image of Britain and how he envisages directing the council that its work should change.

As a supporter of the British Council, I hope that the Minister will respond positively. I hope, too, that that valuable institution continues to go from strength to strength. It represents the best of Britain throughout the world, and brings inestimable benefits to Britain, both in good will and for our economy.

10.49 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): I am delighted to reply on the Government's behalf, and grateful to the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) for initiating the debate. The Government commend the contribution of those hon. Members who serve on the British Council, as well as the work of other hon. Members who regularly contribute to the council's work both here and overseas. I will not be able in the time available to cover all the points raised in the debate, and I may have to save some answers for any future occasion on which hon. Members can again raise the points made today.

It gives me great pleasure to state the Government's appreciation of and support for the work of the British Council. The council is going through a period of change and development under a new leadership team. Dr. David Drewry took over as director general in January on the retirement of Sir John Hanson. Sir Martin Jacomb will retire this month after a distinguished term of office as chairman, and I pay tribute to his enthusiastic service. I warmly welcome the appointment of Baroness Kennedy as his successor following the unanimous decision to appoint her.

The House will appreciate the comments of the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) who set the record straight following the disgraceful speech made by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who demonstrated how isolated he is from the House and how isolated his politics are from the British people.

Hon. Members have spoken eloquently about the British Council. Its activities are at record levels. It operates from 230 offices in 109 countries, which is more than double the 1980 figure of 108 offices in 79 countries. The scope of its work is impressive. It embraces promotion of the English language, recruitment of overseas students, human rights, gender-based work, good governance, scientific collaboration, the provision of libraries and high-tech information services, the showcasing of contemporary arts and much more. When I visit British posts in the area for which I am responsible, I always make a point of visiting the British Council, and I am always impressed with the commitment of those who work for it, and with the quality of their work. The British Council's work emphasises British excellence, creativity and ingenuity. It enhances our prestige, supports our exports and makes us long-term friends throughout the world.

The council received a financial shock in the 1995 public expenditure settlement, which left it facing a real-terms decline in its combined grants in aid of 16 per cent. over three years. That was later partially mitigated, but the council had to embark on major restructuring to make its sums add up. It shed one quarter of its headquarters staff, and moved to smaller premises in Manchester.

I am therefore delighted to confirm two outcomes of the comprehensive spending review that should help the council. First, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development have agreed that the two separate grants in aid given to the council in recent years should be amalgamated into a single grant administered by the Foreign Office, subject to parliamentary approval. The council has warmly welcomed that move. The funding transferred from the Department for International Development will include an inflation uplift for the three years covered by the comprehensive spending review.

The most immediate effect of that change is that the British Council will no longer be required to report and account to two Departments. Arrangements that were appropriate when the Overseas Development Administration was part of the Foreign Office are less so since the establishment of a separate Department. The change will reduce the administrative load on the council, and will enable it to carry out its activities as a seamless whole.

Secondly, we have reversed the real-terms decline in grant in aid funding. For three years, the council will receive full annual inflation uplifts plus a further increase of £2 million a year. That is the same percentage increase as that received by the Foreign Office. It will enable the council to plan ahead securely, and to seize opportunities around the world.

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister mentioned the cuts made in 1995. Will he confirm that between 1979–95 Conservative Governments increased grant in aid to the British Council by more than one third, which is considerably more than the increase that he has just announced? Can he assure us that no British Council post overseas will close, and that any closure of Foreign Office posts will not adversely affect British Council presence in the relevant countries?

Mr. Henderson: The hon. Lady is selective in her choice of statistics. Were she to choose the trend in the 1980s, a different picture would emerge of real cuts in resources for the British Council. If she does not believe me, she should ask anyone involved in the council, who would soon confirm that that was so. The council will welcome yesterday's spending review.

Mrs. Gillan *rose—*

Mr. Henderson: I have not answered the hon. Lady's previous question yet. She asked about Foreign Office

posts. We are reviewing our current structure, and the British Council's requirements are among the top priorities of that review. When we make decisions, we shall report them to the House.

Mr. Soames: The British Council needs another review like it needs a hole in the head. It needs stability, and to be allowed simply to get on with its work with more money. The Minister has conjured up the first bit. Will he leave the council alone to get on with the job?

Mr. Henderson: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor made it clear yesterday that the public expenditure review is about change in order to receive. No Department is exempt, and it is right that our Departments should modernise along with the country. We need to seek change that will represent our people better abroad. The Foreign Office is right to conduct a review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt) mentioned the contracting arrangements undertaken by the British Council for the Department for International Development when foreign aid is ready for disbursement. Procedures are changing, and there will be increasing emphasis on giving aid directly to the recipient countries. Previously, the British Council and others have acted as contractors, but that role will be reduced. As my hon. Friend says, the British Council and other non-governmental organisations have an opportunity to contact recipient countries directly to see whether they can tender for administration of the work. I assure the House that any support that the Government can give the British Council in that regard will be given. There is an opportunity because those schemes need a delivery mechanism. As I think the world of foreign aid recognises, it does not matter how much aid is available, without a delivery mechanism it is often wasted and does not reach its intended destination. There is a crucial role there for the British Council, which, at the same time, can bolster British interests.

The council is taking a fresh look at its mission and long-term strategy. Thanks to our ability through the spending review to provide a firm and increasing level of grant in aid over the next three years, the strategy re-examination has a firm foundation of financial stability. I am confident that the council, with its skills, experience and high reputation overseas, will continue to play an essential role in promoting this country's interests and influence around the world.

Climate Change (Conference)

11 am

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): This is an important subject. I hope that the House agrees that it is important to have an Adjournment debate on the Government's preparations for the Buenos Aires climate convention later this year. I hope that this and previous Adjournment debates on environmental matters will set a pattern whereby the House debates important issues before the Government go to major international conferences to represent the interests of our country. The main function of Parliament is holding the Executive to account. That means that, in international negotiations, there should be both pre-conference and post-conference debates so that we can assess what happened and what was achieved. I hope that the success of some of us in requesting such debates will continue to set a pattern.

This is one of the most crucial issues facing the planet. The preparations for the conference are important. If it fails, and the stand-off at the end of the Kyoto conference continues, the outlook is grim. It is a question not only of negotiations but of the will of countries to do something about global warming and the pollution that goes with it. I shall consider four areas of the Kyoto protocol: emission trading; carbon sinks such as forests that hold carbon reserves; the participation of countries in the Kyoto and Buenos Aires agreements; and, most important, the adequacy of the commitments made to deal with global warming and climate change.

This is the greatest issue of our time. It is obvious that the huge growth in carbon dioxide and other global warming gases since the start of the industrial revolution has had an enormous effect. I know that there are those in the House and elsewhere who dispute the notion of global warming and suggest that it is a phenomenon that can be studied in geological time, during which there have been rapid increases and decreases in the Earth's temperature. Clearly, the pattern of weather and climate must be studied, but, like millions of others, I cannot believe that the massive emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels since 1800 has not had a dramatic effect on the world's climate. I believe that it has, and that global warming is so well measured and tested and so widely accepted that it is vital that every Parliament and Government in the world do all that they can to control emissions and to ensure that we live on the planet in a sustainable way. The consequences of not doing so would be disastrous.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The hon. Gentleman may or may not know that I agree that global warming is proven. However, proven or not, we must consider efficiency in energy and the use of resources. It does not harm us to be efficient and reduce emissions, but it might have the most incredible consequences if we do not take such action.

Mr. Corbyn: Clearly, there must be more efficient use of energy and the best technology to try to retain standards of living and activity while preserving the world's environment. I shall return to that because it will be part of the Buenos Aires negotiations.

I want to put some facts on the record. The vast burning of fossil fuels emits carbon faster than the planet can possibly refix it through vegetation—6.2 billion tonnes in

[Mr. Corbyn]

1996 alone. There has been a fourfold increase in the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere since 1950, and CO_2 levels are 29 per cent. above those that existed before the industrial revolution. That figure can be accurately measured using ice core samples from the Antarctic. The concentrations are the highest for 160,000 years. Worldwide temperature measurements show that the temperature rise in general is faster than it has been for a very long time. We reach world temperature highs year on year.

A mass of information and graphs is available. In the 1998 "State of the World", a chapter by Christopher Flavin and Seth Dunn outlines how the emission of CO_2 and other pollutants has grown dramatically since 1800 and shows the disparity of that growth in different parts of the world. For example, the industrialised countries of the United States, western Europe and the former Soviet Union have emitted the most over that period. The developing countries are increasing the fastest, although the largest emitters of pollutants are, by a long way, the wealthiest countries.

If we now agreed that all carbon dioxide emissions will be cut by a half in the next century—a major undertaking requiring massive changes in industrial systems and the huge use of sustainable systems and technology to achieve anything like it—carbon levels would be at least 40 per cent. higher a century from now. We will not stabilise global temperature for at least a century. We have made such massive changes to the world climate in the past 200 years that it would take at least 100 years of total commitment by every country and Government in the world merely to stabilise it a century from now. We have set in train a huge change in global climate which cannot be stopped overnight. The conferences and conventions are staging posts in a much longer process.

I could spend the whole 90 minutes available for this debate giving examples of the effects of global warming and increased pollution, but that would not be sensible because I hope that the House and most of the public well understand those matters. I thought this morning as I listened to the radio of new advice about people going out in the sun because of the danger of getting skin cancer. Skin cancers from sunburn are partly a product of pollution. Their high incidence in Australia and the southern hemisphere is partly because of the hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic. There is now also a similar hole over the Arctic. There is macabre humour in sheep wearing sunglasses in southern Chile to protect their eyes, but the problem of skin cancers in the southern hemisphere is serious and likely to get worse. That is a product of chlorofluorocarbon emissions. Even if all CFC emissions were stopped now, it would take several decades to repair the holes in the ozone layer.

Rising sea levels are apparent around the globe. The cost of constructing sea defences will be huge. Sea levels will continue to rise because of the process that we have already set in train. Unless we do something about it, there will be larger sea level rises. The Maldive islands may cease to exist. Coastal lands where millions of people live, such as Bangladesh and river deltas all over south Asia, will be at serious risk, as they already are from hurricanes and other weather phenomena.

The El Niño effect is perhaps better studied and reported this time than ever before, so one has to be careful of believing that things are more dramatic because one has more information. However, a comparison with what has happened in previous times suggests that the problems caused by El Niño are compounded by continuing global warming.

There is clear evidence of warmer summers in the northern hemisphere and slightly less cold winters. There is evidence of melting of the polar ice cap at both poles. It was traditionally just the north polar ice cap that was melting, but there is now melting at both poles. The migration north of warmer summers means big changes. In Alaska, 2.5 million trees have been lost since 1989 because of the growth in the population of the tree bark beetle, which destroys them. The beetle used to reach sexual maturity in two years and therefore bred fairly slowly, but it now reaches maturity in one year because of the warmer summers, resulting in the progress of that destruction. That is just one of many examples, and the generally destabilised weather patterns that go with them.

The melting of the polar ice caps and warming of the sub-polar regions—the tundra—lead to increased emissions of methane, which results in a faster melt. As snow cover deteriorates or lasts for a shorter time, there is a higher rate of absorption of solar energy and thus a warming of the planet. One could give many such examples. The few that I have given show just how serious things are.

In 1990, after years of discussion and debate, the United Nations specified that temperature rises should be limited to a maximum of 0.1 deg centigrade per decade, and overall should be no more than 1 deg. It calculated that that was the largest rise that the earth's climatic systems could cope with; anything beyond that would lead to unpredictable changes. Likewise, it specified that sea level rises should be limited to 20 mm per decade with a maximum of 20 cm above 1990 levels. Unless we are able seriously to reduce and control carbon emissions, those targets cannot be met—indeed, the levels will fall well short of them. If we do not change, by 2060 carbon dioxide levels will double. The situation is obviously extremely serious. This is one of the warmest years on record.

Many people around the world recognise that the pollution and the unstable climate are caused largely by pollution from the wealthiest industrial countries in the world. The world is a desperately unfair place. A quarter of the world's population live in terrible, desperate poverty. Another quarter have a low life expectancy and lead a fairly poor existence. Only the top proportion have a high standard of living. The industrial revolution has taken place in Europe and north America, but it is now taking place in China, Asia and Latin America. Everything that the western Europeans and north Americans went through in the last century is now happening in China, India and throughout south Asia and Latin America.

We have to examine the way in which we run our economies and the unsustainable levels of waste produced in the United States and Europe. Twenty per cent.—one fifth—of the world's population accounts for 80 per cent.—of all pollution emissions. It is not the massed

millions of people in Bangladesh and India who are causing the world's pollution; it is a relatively small number of people in the United States.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): The United States represents less than 2 per cent. of the earth's surface. The fact that it produces a relatively large amount of waste—however one likes to categorise that—is not so surprising, but one has to keep it in perspective. The great majority of the earth's surface is not land mass or built on, and, by definition, it does not produce the waste products that the hon. Gentleman is discussing. To describe the United States and, for that matter, the United Kingdom as a major polluter is meaningless in the context of the percentage of the world's surface that they represent. It is a drop in the ocean.

Mr. Corbyn: The oceans cover the majority of the world's surface by a long way, so I suppose that "a drop in the ocean" is a good analogy. To answer the hon. Lady's point, what I am talking about is the proportion of the world's human population. In those terms, the United States is fairly small, yet it manages to create vastly more pollution than the rest of the planet.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The United States has 4 per cent. of the world's population and produces 25 per cent. of the world's emissions. That is clearly unacceptable. It takes the work of 120 people to service the energy needs of one American, but the work of only one person to service the energy needs of one Bangladeshi. If that is fair, it is a curious kind of fairness.

Mr. Corbyn: I am not defending the system; I am merely describing it. I think that the former Minister's intervention was directed at the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) rather than at me. I am pouring oil on troubled waters. I hope that I am helping Conservative Members out in their minor disputes.

Mr. Robathan: For the first time ever.

Mr. Corbyn: No. Daniel comes to judgment eventually.

I shall move on to a subject that will not please Opposition Members—what we do about climate change now. *[Interruption.]* It may well please them; I hope so. There are several issues that we have to address. The first is a general one. In 1992, for the first time, the Rio summit took place and some fairly dramatic proposals on sustainability were made. It was a very important conference. Perhaps it should have been tougher and more requirements should have been included in the agreements that were reached; nevertheless, it was an important and dramatic conference. Unfortunately, at the same time, the United Nations largely abdicated responsibility for economic strategy and put all its faith in the International Monetary Fund and the World bank, which believe essentially in a free market economy.

A free market economy is concerned less about the environment than about the profitability of enterprises. It is concerned less about sustainability than about wealth creation and aggrandisement. As the debate continues, we will recognise that the economic policies promoted by those two major institutions are contributing to pollution rather than controlling them. I know that the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) probably does not agree with me. We have had this discussion before, and no doubt we shall continue to have it, but even he will accept that an unfettered free market economy has no interest in protecting the environment—that it has an interest only in protecting and perpetuating itself.

The gap between rich and poor is part of this debate. As the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal rightly said, the energy requirements of the United States are so much larger than those of everyone else that one has to ask some serious questions about its commitment and its lack of action since the Kyoto summit, and about what pressure we can put on it.

The United States Senate voted 95:0 before Kyoto that the US Administration should not sign up to any agreement unless it included the developing countries. Kyoto applies only to the developed nations at present. Since then, no ratification has taken place within the US constitution and it is not likely to. We could spend an awful lot of time campaigning around the world to try to embarrass the United States on this matter, but I suspect that it is unembarrassable until more people wake up to the issue of sustainability of the planet.

The United States has very low fuel prices. People have a love affair with high fuel consumption vehicles and industrial pollutants. Enormous pressure has been brought to bear by American big business through lobbyists and the like not to ratify the convention because the United States wishes to retain its current industrial system without any change whatever. That is a huge barrier. We have a huge problem facing us, but that is not a reason for doing nothing; it is a reason for doing more and putting on more pressure.

Unless it is resolved, the current stand-off between the United States and China will have fairly serious effects. I should be interested in hearing from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary the outcome of the Secretary of State's recent visit to China and his assessment of the effect of President Clinton's visit. What discussions occurred between the United States and China on their future participation?

Some way forward has to emerge from Buenos Aires. The Globe group—Global Legislators for a Balanced Environment—which is now supported by many African, Chinese and Indian delegates, has come up with four proposals. They are that all countries should set internationally agreed ceilings on CO_2 emissions; that carbon emission contraction budgets should be agreed and reviewable yearly, or at least at five-year intervals; that countries should agree on a CO_2 emissions budget, so that there can be a degree of trading within it; and that we should set a standard to reduce emissions globally.

I believe that we should be concerned about trading in carbon emissions, which is one of the proposals advanced at Kyoto and since. If we become too involved in such trading, we risk missing the whole point, which is to prevent pollution and to arrest climate change and the accompanying damage, and becoming enmeshed in a debate about who trades what. It is also important that carbon sinks—forest or vegetation cover—should be excluded from any trading, because, if they are included, a country might say that, in return for destroying 100,000 square miles of forest, it would close down a coal-burning power station. We have to protect forest cover, so I

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support the views of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth that carbon sinks should be excluded from emission trading.

There is no reason why individual countries should not set higher targets for reducing CO_2 emissions. Before Kyoto, the British Government proposed a 20 per cent. reduction; unfortunately, that was not universally supported at Kyoto and we ended up with an 8 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions. However, if individual countries set considerably higher targets, that will help to embarrass the United States into doing more. If we make the whole process of protecting and preserving the environment dependent on the power of the United States lobby—in other words, the rest of the world does nothing until the United States does something—we will watch as the problem worsens. We have to do both—exert pressure on the US to participate while simultaneously campaigning around the rest of the world.

If we are to make an historic contribution to the planet, we have to create a world environment that is sustainable, equitable and, above all, accountable. Currently, much of the world's economic activity is unaccountable and much of the world's pollution is created without regard for anyone else. In proposing that Buenos Aires should suggest measures that seriously address the problem, we are not taking a backward view of protecting the environment or adopting a negative approach—quite the opposite. Kyoto has to be about examining the use of the best forms of renewable energy and technology and the best forms of technology to ensure that energy is efficiently and effectively used, and about ensuring that that technology is available to the entire planet.

I recall an interesting discussion in which I participated some years ago in Uganda. Delegates from all over Africa were talking about how they could develop their way out of poverty—an understandable and laudable aim. They said, "We have to industrialise—we have to go forward," but a group of African-Americans who were taking part said that that was not the way forward. They said that, in the United States, such development had caused pollution and poverty and had created a huge rust belt. What should be available for Africa and the world's poorest countries is the best forms of technology that would allow them to harness agricultural sustainability alongside high-tech communications and industry. We do not have to re-create in the third world the horrors of the industrial revolutions of Europe and north America in order to improve living standards; we should be able to use the available technology to jump a stage and ensure that we live in a sustainable world.

Today's debate is crucial, because it will enable the Government to set out their position before the Buenos Aires conference, and those hon. Members who have come along today will be able to express their views. I hope that it will enable the public to understand that there has been progress and that all the environmental campaigning and the energy put into local Agenda 21 groups and so on is having an effect—that what they do is reflected in what goes on in Parliament and in what the Government do.

When the Government go to Buenos Aires, they will have a mandate to achieve the best possible result, which is to help to reduce CO_2 emissions and to stabilise the world's climate change. If we do not achieve that, we will face some serious and dramatic problems relating to weather patterns and climate change. The world's poorest people will be hit hardest and first, but, ultimately, there will be no hiding place for anybody.

11.25 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome the introductory speech of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and agree whole-heartedly with much of what he said. He referred to four specific areas: emission trading, carbon sinks, country participation and adequacy of commitments. In respect of emission trading, I agree that it is important to cap the proportion of a country's reduction target that can be achieved from that source. If that is not done, there may be problems with Russia and other former Communist bloc countries.

It is important not to be sidetracked by the argument about how much carbon dioxide can be absorbed by carbon sinks, because that is extremely difficult to quantify. However, I would not rule out bringing carbon sinks into the equation in the longer term, because, for reasons of biodiversity as much as anything, it is important to ensure that forests have an economic value beyond that ascribed to logging. Currently, the only value ascribed to many of the world's forests is the value of the trees and, as a consequence, great destruction is taking place. We must not lose sight of that point, but I accept that, at the moment, the economics and the difficulties of quantifying are such that it is unrealistic to include this at Buenos Aires.

In respect of country participation, it is right that the world community has started off by looking at the developed nations, because, by and large, it is the developed nations which have caused the problem and are responsible for the vast increase in greenhouse gas emissions over the past 200 years. However, in the next 20, 30 or 40 years, there will be a substantial increase in greenhouse gas emissions from the developing—in many cases, fast-developing—countries. That will make a significant difference to overall world emission levels, so it is important that developing countries are brought into the equation in due course and asked to play their part as well. However, that should not be used as an excuse, by the Americans or anyone else, to blame developing countries for the problems, or to try to impose disproportionate cuts on developing countries' emissions to make up for the profligate way in which the United States and other developed countries, including ourselves, have behaved hitherto.

The hon. Member for Islington, North is right to say that the adequacy of commitments is the most important point. It is a milestone—a "kilometrestone" these days—that in Kyoto we achieved a legally binding agreement from a number of countries on which they will be required to deliver. However, that agreement is loose and shapeless in many respects, so it seems to me that Buenos Aires is about ensuring that the nuts and bolts are put in place. That will be the most difficult part. The test of Kyoto and of whether the world will seriously address the problems is not the initial agreement, even though it was difficult to reach—here I should pay tribute to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the others who played a part in achieving that—but whether the nuts and bolts can be agreed at Buenos Aires. We can no longer rely on warm words and I am slightly discouraged by the fact that the meeting in

Bonn in June of the subsidiary body of the United Nations Forum on Climate Change did not appear to make much progress.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we must make progress at Buenos Aires, but there will be other meetings of the conference parties before the protocol comes into effect at the beginning of the next century, so not absolutely everything is riding on the Buenos Aires conference, although obviously we hope to make significant progress.

Mr. Baker: I entirely concur with the Minister's comments. I was keen to keep to the title of the Adjournment debate, which refers to the conference because you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, might have ruled me out of order if I had wandered on to another subject.

On the adequacy of commitments, I find the attitude of the Americans somewhat depressing—not necessarily the Government, but the Senate and the House of Representatives. I was fortunate to be a member of an all-party group that visited the United Nations at the end of last year. I was horrified, first, by the fact that many influential Americans seem still to question whether climate change is occurring. Although there is a theoretical possibility that change is not occurring, there is scientific evidence that it is, and we should plan accordingly. That does not seem to be accepted in the United States, where elected representatives have a curious and inward-looking attitude.

That makes it difficult for this Government and others to deal with the United States Government, who cannot deliver on what they have agreed. The fact that the US has made so little progress since Kyoto is a matter of concern and makes it difficult for others to make progress. As the hon. Member for Islington, North said, that is not a reason for us not to make progress where we can in this country, in the European Union and in other developing and developed countries.

I shall concentrate the rest of my remarks on how the United Kingdom and the European Union can, first, help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally—although I accept that we are a relatively small player—and, secondly, set an example so that, when we lecture others, we can do so from a sound base.

The evidence from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment has been very encouraging. It is clear that those Ministers, and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), understand the issue and have been working well. They played a major role at Kyoto and they understand what domestic policies are needed to achieve change. However, there is not the same commitment and understanding in other Government Departments such as the Treasury. The Treasury's commitment to green economics has moved backwards since last July. We do not have a green book. When the Financial Secretary to the Treasury appears before the Environmental Audit Committee or the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, she seems to suggest that such matters are for the DETR and fails to understand that they are matters for the whole Government. We need to mesh the environment and the economy in this country and world wide if we are to make progress. The environment cannot be a bolt-on concern, as it still seems to be for certain Government Departments.

A carbon tax was first suggested in the European Union in 1991. The suggested levy was $3 a barrel, with an increase of $1 a barrel each year thereafter. Since then, we have had no carbon tax, but energy taxes have been introduced in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland and other countries. In the UK, we have limited environmental taxes on energy to road fuel duty increments of 6 per cent. per annum. I am advocating not a massive increase in taxation but a change from a tax on "goods", such as employment, to a tax on "bads" such as pollution. The Environmental Audit Committee has considered such suggestions in detail and I am entirely disappointed by the Treasury's negative response to them. The Treasury likes to think of itself as modern, but it is, to use the words of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis), outmoded in its response, and it should update itself. We need to change Treasury policy.

We need also to consider our energy policy. Since 1970, energy consumption in this country has increased by 87 per cent. in the transport sector, 30 per cent. in the domestic sector and 21 per cent. in the service sector, and has decreased by 40 per cent. in industry. The DETR's figures suggest that energy-efficient measures alone could save 20 to 30 per cent. of carbon dioxide emissions. According to Greenpeace, a cost-efficiency programme could create 20,000 jobs. The Government's energy advisers, the energy technology support unit—have shown that two thirds of projected energy demand could be met by renewables by 2025.

There is huge potential for changing energy practice and policy in this country, first, in reducing energy consumption and, secondly, in changing energy generation from non-green to green sources. That can be done. Although the Government have committed themselves to an increase in generation from renewable sources, I am not convinced that the recent review in any way shows an understanding of the need to make the drastic changes to which the hon. Member for Islington, North referred.

This is not a time tentatively to take one small step at a time, to take stock and hope that everything works out. We need to take radical, drastic action in a short time. Radical steps would provide many opportunities for businesses to benefit from changing to green technology and to be in the lead in the world. They could, for example, simply change policies and practices in their factories. In my constituency, under the green business scheme—which this Government support, as did the previous Government—£2 million is being invested in an industrial estate in Newhaven. A massive increase in profits has been generated for the companies involved, simply by introducing energy-efficient measures. Those companies are not only helping the environment, but making much higher bottom-line profits. Companies can have their green cake and eat it. My message to those who resist environmental measures is that they are not helping business by doing so. They will help business by encouraging such measures.

Finally, on transport policy, I hope that the transport White Paper will be radical. I am sorry that the Government are going ahead with the Birmingham northern relief road. That is entirely wrong. I hope that

[Mr. Baker]

the White Paper will not include schemes to widen the M25. I hope that there will be capital investment in rail. The Government have accepted over many decades that it is right to invest in new roads. They should accept also that it is right to put public money into new rail schemes, rather than leaving them to the private sector.

The Government should put their own house in order. They have made a good start in the DETR, but a much slower start elsewhere. I am confident that, if they do that, we can provide a moral lead, and we must hope that the Americans and others will follow.

11.38 am

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) has secured this important debate. I am glad to join my colleagues who congratulated my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on his return from Kyoto, where he undoubtedly played a vital part in brokering the eventual agreement on emissions. Like hon. Members on both sides of the House, I wish him well at Buenos Aires.

I have two serious concerns. First, as other hon. Members have said, trading emissions will not achieve the environmental benefits that should be the principal aim. I join colleagues in urging the Deputy Prime Minister to press all participating Governments at Buenos Aires clearly to define the principles for trading emissions and to set deadlines for the drawing up of clear rules on trading.

Secondly, I urge the Government to re-examine their proposed energy policies with a view to implementing their 20 per cent. national target on CO_2 emissions before ratification of the Kyoto protocol. Specifically, I am concerned because the most important factor in climate change is carbon dioxide, and the single greatest contributor to United Kingdom CO_2 emissions is electricity generation. Therefore, the electricity generation mix is absolutely key to the attainment of sensible environmental objectives.

I hope that renewable sources of energy will play a rapidly increasing role in the short, medium and long terms. There should also be a place for coal in the future of electricity generation. Coal may establish itself in a stronger position some time next century when clean burn technology becomes available and the supply of other carbon fuels diminishes. We all share in concern for the coalfield communities, and I hope that the proposals of the task force will be of significant benefit to them.

However, by burning 25 million tonnes of coal annually instead of an equivalent amount of gas, we create about 28 million tonnes of extra CO_2 emissions. It does not seem sensible to expect to achieve offsetting reductions in any other sector—according to one calculation, we would need to remove 33 million cars from the roads in order to achieve the same sort of CO_2 saving.

That is why I tabled my early-day motion 1512, which calls for rapid reform of the market in electricity so that all sections of that market can make informed planning decisions. At present, there is an effective moratorium on the building of new gas-fired power stations. It is said that that is essential while a fair marketplace is created. However, I understand that it takes several years to plan a new power station and bring it into service. So I cannot see how there is any danger of new gas-fired power stations competing in the market until that fair marketplace has been created.

I point out that south Wales, the area most affected by pit closures, would also be most immediately affected by the ban on gas station construction if the Baglan bay project does not proceed. Many construction jobs would be lost, as would many thousands more in the proposed attached industrial park. There is no justification for replacing one skewed market with another, particularly if it prejudices the attainment of our lead-setting air quality targets, of which the Government should be rightly proud, and which are surely the Deputy Prime Minister's strongest card in the difficult, but important, negotiations in Buenos Aires.

11.42 am

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I, too, compliment the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on securing this debate. I share his view that it is important to ensure that our politicians receive sound scientific advice before they go off to conferences. Policy decisions that are made on the basis of agreements reached at such conferences have profound implications for our industries and for jobs.

The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) pointed out that industries involved in fossil fuel production can be severely affected if the Government take the wrong decisions. The implication is that those industries produce substances that affect the environment and must therefore be controlled. Hon. Members who represent areas where such industries are important employers often face a dilemma: by definition, they do not want to see the jobs go, but, by ideology, they subscribe to the idea of global warming, which runs counter to the interests of the industries that they seek to preserve.

On more than one occasion, I have attempted to give an elementary science lesson—dating from the days when I taught science—about what constitutes global warming. We use that combination of words when we are talking partly about the climate—the weather is variable and the climate alters over time. That is caused by forces outside our control. Sun activity varies and one will find that it corresponds with climate changes on earth. When sun spots are active, there are periods of high temperature on the earth's surface. Some people might call that global warming. At other times, we have ice ages, which correspond to periods when the sun's activity is much lower.

The second factor involved in global warming is volcanic activity. People seem to think that there is only one active volcano on the earth's surface that erupts every few years and causes a minor problem that soon disappears. In fact, there are more than 100 active volcanos that, for a short period, cause cooling of the earth's climate. They emit large quantities of sulphur dioxide, which reach to a high level in the upper atmosphere. That forms a screen that prevents the sun's rays from reaching the earth's surface, which causes a period of cooler weather. I see the hon. Member for Islington, North nodding; I am delighted that he agrees with me so far.

Mr. Corbyn: I agree with the hon. Lady's point that volcanos have an effect on our climate. She has not

mentioned—perhaps she was about to—that the emission of large amounts of dust from volcanos into the upper atmosphere also has a shielding effect on the earth. However, if we remove the effects of volcanos by mathematical means, we must agree that global warming is still taking place.

Mrs. Gorman: That may be the case; I do not deny that we have changes in climate. Throughout the traceable history of the earth's surface, there have been minor alterations in the earth's weather. I am sure that the protagonists of global warming would have loved us to be having a boiling hot summer with water shortages. They would have said, "Ah ha, that is evidence of what we are warning you about". However, we are having a rather damp summer—I do not know to what the hon. Gentleman attributes that. I am sure that it has nothing to do with coal miners in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis).

Angela Eagle: The hon. Lady has visited the Department and we have had some interesting discussions about her views. Does she admit that the intergovernmental panel on climate change is seeking to examine, by various sophisticated scientific means, the human effect on climate change and to disaggregate that from the normal, natural processes that she describes? It has detected a discernible human effect on the climate as a result of the activities that hon. Members have mentioned today. Kyoto is about those activities, not the normal fluctuations of the planetary system.

Mrs. Gorman: I subscribe to the Minister's views. However, my thesis, and that of many other scientists, is that the amount of difference that human activity makes to the climate is infinitesimal.

We demonise carbon dioxide, which is allegedly the greenhouse gas. However, the most important of the gases is water vapour. That is hardly mentioned because people cannot demonise the nice clean rain that falls from our skies. Carbon dioxide is a trace gas in our atmosphere, constituting fewer than 300 parts per million—or 0.0035 per cent. The substance is extremely valuable to plants and very soluble in oceans. If we want plants to grow more quickly, we give them extra carbon dioxide. Yet we attribute the perceived problems of global warming to that trace gas.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): The hon. Lady's arguments are well known. The intergovernmental panel on climate change has examined those issues in great detail and I remind the hon. Lady that its conclusions are based on exhaustive peer review and consensus among scientists from all over the world. It is not to be imagined that those people do not know about water vapour, for example. In conclusion, I quote Pope to the hon. Lady:

"A little learning is a dang'rous thing:

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring".

That might be relevant to the hon. Lady's remarks.

Mrs. Gorman: I think the hon. Gentleman is trying to undermine my scientific credentials, but I do not really mind.

More than 200 scientists attended the Rio convention, of which 54 were Nobel prize-winners who wrote a dissenting report on this thesis. Their views are ignored because they do not reflect the populist mood, which is largely fuelled, and certainly influenced, by pressure groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. The views of those scientists do not happen to fit the pressure groups' vision of Utopia—of the earth preserved from the wickednesses of mankind.

Notice, too, that, whenever we speak about pollution, the United States is demonised. Localised pollution does exist; most of it is in eastern Europe, where people continue to use outdated technology and produce especially offensive smoke emissions, and where motor cars are old bangers, which are not being cleaned up as our cars are. All those factors are relevant to localised pollution, but I keep trying to put this in perspective. I repeat: not only is the United States a tiny part of the earth's surface, but the United Kingdom is even smaller. We make up less than 1 per cent. of the globe. Whatever industrial output we manage to produce in this country, we are infinitesimal compared with the enormity of the atmosphere that surrounds our earth, and the other factors involved in climatic change.

Nevertheless, localised climates can be improved, and undoubtedly our car industries have gone to great lengths to remove the particulates that come out of exhaust pipes and chimney pots in order to clean up their emissions, and have succeeded in reducing some of that CO_2. Even though, in my view, the case is bogus, they are responding to public pressure.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will my hon. Friend give her scientific judgment on the fact that it is said that, before the industrial revolution, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was 280 ppm, whereas it is now 359 ppm? Is not that, by any standards, a very significant increase, albeit at a very low level? What effect does she judge that that has on the behaviour of the climate?

Mrs. Gorman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The statistics on the quantity of CO_2 before the industrial revolution are extremely dodgy. The best estimates, which were made around the 1840s, were about 300 ppm. Current estimates are around 350 ppm. If the pre-industrial revolution quantity is the equivalent of a drop in the ocean, the current quantity might be two drops in the ocean; such levels are still not great enough to cause serious problems. We divert our attention when we go off on the wrong tack; we should focus, as we do, on making our localised climates much cleaner, and on exporting technology to those third-world countries that can do something to improve the local climate. I have no objection to trying to make the world a nicer place in which to live; I am simply saying that if we demonise the wrong things, we shall end up imposing on our industries expenses that will have a harmful effect on the people whom we represent.

That subject has been raised with me by the Minister and by the hon. Gentleman whose constituency I also could not pronounce, but which I know is a wonderful place to come from. Both the hon. Gentleman and the Minister make valid points, but I want to ensure that Ministers who go off to these conferences are well armed with a balanced view of the underlying science.

In the debate, as usual, the United States has been blamed for not taking enough notice of climate change. It is sceptical about the targets that we have set ourselves

[Mrs. Gorman]

for CO_2 emissions. If we were to pursue the Kyoto target of a national reduction of 20 per cent. in a couple of years' time, or whenever it is, the expenses that would be imposed on our industries would make them seriously uncompetitive with those in third-world countries or eastern European countries—the former Soviet Union and China included—and for what? By making those changes at home, we shall have no effect on those countries' heavily polluted local climate. I put it to the House that it is our responsibility to take those points into consideration.

Mr. Baker: Is it not the case that when a business reduces its energy costs, it helps the environment and saves money?

Mrs. Gorman: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point but does one reduce energy costs by declaring that factories may not use fossil fuels? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman supports the use of nuclear energy on a greater scale. That is much more environmentally friendly, in the sense that it does not produce emissions of the type that worry him.

Mr. Corbyn: Says who?

Mrs. Gorman: I know that, when I make those points, I am in a minority of one, but that does not mean that I am wrong.

Incidentally, before the industrial revolution, as uncleaned coal was the only domestic and industrial fuel, the atmosphere in our country was so polluted that the air was almost unbreathable. In the 17th century, John Evelyn, the well-known diarist, wrote a famous pamphlet about the smokes of London, called "Fumifugium: or the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated".

We have cleaned things up enormously—we have done so even in our lifetime, and we are still doing it—but we must bear in mind the fact that in imposing such targets on our industries, we could be causing them severe problems in remaining competitive in a world that does not take such a severe attitude to such substances.

I urge the Minister—despite that fact that she has information from the international climate corporation, or whatever it is called, and other organisations—to take into account the fact that the United States and its scientific community are dealing with factual evidence, much of it produced by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA is observing the atmosphere from outside the earth's immediate climate and reporting back to the United States Government. It is warning them that the targets that are being set at conferences on climate change, on the back of partly emotional pressure from the pressure groups and some scientific information, could seriously damage our wealth.

11.57 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on securing the debate. The issue is of the utmost importance, not just for hon. Members but for people throughout the world. It strikes me as a little bit off that we are reduced to discussing the issue at an Adjournment debate on a Wednesday morning. I shall return to that point. My hon. Friend described in graphic detail not only the significance of climate change, but the relationship between environmental policy and social justice and between environmental policy and free-market economics. We should constantly keep those issues at the forefront of our attention.

I endorse the remarks of other hon. Members in support of the work of the Deputy Prime Minister in leading the international negotiations, in helping to secure an agreement within the European Union for a 12.5 per cent. cut for Britain and other cuts for other European countries, and in moving the issue of climate change up the political agenda. I pay tribute to the work of all the Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, although I share the reservations of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) about the culture of some other Departments.

I have no wish to undermine the scientific credentials of the hon. Lady from the unpronounceable constituency—the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman)—but if it is a choice between accepting her view or accepting that of the intergovernmental panel, of scientists in all the leading industrial and developing nations, and of the Governments of all the nations that were represented at the Kyoto conference, I must accept their view. I note that the intergovernmental panel said that, on the balance of evidence, there is a discernible human effect on climate change. If, in years to come, the balance of evidence shifted the other way—which is unlikely—would not the hon. Lady agree that we should reduce our dependence on the burning of fossil fuels? It is important for us to conserve our energy supplies and increase energy efficiency, regardless of whether she accepts that the continuous burning of fossil fuels and the emission of greenhouse gases has an effect on climate change.

It is important that we focus on the concept of climate change, rather than simply global warming. I disagree with the assertion by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North that the issues are now well understood by the public. We have merely scratched the surface of public understanding. The term "global warming" is now fixed in the public mind, but not the implications of climate change in its wider sense.

Several hon. Members representing constituencies in East Anglia have understood pretty quickly that climate change involves not just global warming, but rising sea levels, and that that poses a threat to their political careers far greater than the Boundary Commission, the vagaries of four-yearly elections or proportional representation. We must constantly emphasise that climate change has varied, unpredictable and dramatic effects, which will intensify unless urgent action is taken.

There is a growing awareness that the powers of nation states to influence and control certain policies are increasingly circumscribed, that we are increasingly interdependent, and that therefore there is a need for more international agreement. I fear that our parliamentary structures and procedures have not latched on to that. We need a new approach to the scrutiny of the growing number of international agreements that we have signed or hope to sign. I refer to the way in which the House dealt with the multilateral agreement on investment and other

conventions—the biodiversity convention, the Oslo-Paris—OSPAR—convention and the Basle convention on hazardous waste.

There has been virtually no discussion, in the House or even in Committee, of the increasing number of environmental treaties. Just three weeks ago in Aarhus, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment signed a new convention on public participation in environmental decision making. If we believe in public participation, extending access, increasing public information and establishing freedom of information, we must adapt our parliamentary procedures to ensure that there is scrutiny of draft agreements before the Government sign them and full debate once they have been signed.

With regard to Buenos Aires, there are a small number of absolute priorities, which I hope that the Government will endorse. First, it is critical that emissions trading is not seen as a way out of accepting our collective responsibility for global warming. I endorse the points that were made about carbon sinks and the view that they should not be involved in emissions trading. There must be a cap on the proportion of CO_2 cuts that are achieved by emissions trading.

Secondly, because we are dealing with a new area of science and international agreement, compliance is critical. Giving the difficulty of measuring emissions and evaluating the industries and human activities that contribute to them, effective and accurate compliance regimes are crucial. I hope that that will be a priority at Buenos Aires. If an agreement is reached, targets are set and mechanisms are agreed, but compliance systems are not in force, the entire arrangement will lose credibility.

Thirdly, I hope that, in the lead-up to Buenos Aires, our Government and others will try to shift the focus of climate change. Instead of being perceived as a threat and a burden on business and industry, it should be seen as an opportunity. I know that some hon. Members do not support the work of Friends of the Earth, but I commend the recent report launched by Friends of the Earth, "Cutting CO_2—Creating Jobs."

In raising the level of public understanding, we must make it clear that the environmental challenges that face us are not threats, but opportunities. Above all, they are opportunities to create enormous numbers of new jobs, and even to sustain full employment. That requires a radical rethink of our approach to economics, but it is well documented and well researched. We must drive home the message that climate change provides opportunities not only for a better environment, but for fuller and more stable employment.

Fourthly, the Government should explicitly adopt the philosophy of contraction and convergence. It has been said that if we are to tackle the problem, the only way forward is to get global agreements for ceilings on the emission of carbon and other greenhouse gases; then get agreements between the industrial and the developing nations, so that the industrial nations gradually contract their emissions. Ultimately, the two groups must converge, so that, by the end of the next century, there is a more equitable global system and a fairer agreement on emissions. Contraction and convergence is the policy that we should adopt.

I endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Lewes about the fact that Ministers, and officials in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are ahead of their colleagues in other Departments. Unfortunately, policy will be determined not by the DETR, but by the Treasury. We must continually put pressure on the Treasury to change its culture.

Taxation policy is critical to the achievement of success, and must be shifted away from labour and other good resources to discouraging pollution and encouraging the conservation of natural resources. We must drive home the message of green taxation. Also, as I said in the last debate on the issue, the code of fiscal responsibility that the Chancellor launched at the last Budget must be amended to include a reference to sustainable development. If that can be achieved in the next year or two, it will go some way to satisfying hon. Members' criticism of the slow pace of progress in the Treasury.

Finally, will my hon. Friend the Minister deal with the following questions in her reply? First, what is the Government's view of their 20 per cent. objective? That is not a statutory agreement, but the Government's intention. Does it still apply? Secondly, what is the Government's attitude to contraction and convergence? Will that be their explicit negotiating position at Buenos Aires? Thirdly, will the Government publish their intentions about the range of measures that they intend to adopt in order to secure their 12.5 per cent. target under the recent European Union agreement?

Fourthly, to return to my starting point, it is ludicrous that these issues of fundamental global importance should be squeezed into a Wednesday morning Adjournment debate. Will my hon. Friend try to persuade her colleagues to agree a debate on the Buenos Aires conference in Government time during the spill over period?

12.8 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): I shall be brief, so that other hon. Members, especially those on the Front Benches, have an opportunity to speak.

I endorse the request of the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) that the Government should take seriously the issue of contraction and convergence—or, to give it its full title, contraction, convergence, allocation and trade. The UK has an opportunity to take the lead in the matter. The policy of contraction and convergence has been adopted by GLOBE International. That is the nearest we can get to an internationally agreed position among parliamentarians. The sample of parliamentarians is far from exhaustive, but the position that has been adopted is the outcome of serious consideration.

That position includes the principles of equity and sustainability. It is ethically right, being founded on the principle of allocating emission rights on a per capita basis. I cannot envisage any other ethical basis for the trading of emissions. Regardless of whether such trading is ethically right, in practical terms it is probably our best chance of getting everyone on board. It is compatible, ultimately, with the Chinese position, and will probably be compatible with the American position once the Americans recognise that, if an agreement is to be reached so that the climate can be protected—which is as important to the Americans as to anyone else—there must be acceptance of the equity principle and a proper basis for allocations.

I hope that the United Kingdom Government will adopt that principle and use it later in the year, before Buenos Aires. Perhaps, during his visit to China,

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

the Prime Minister could explore the issue with the Chinese Government, and the Government could then push hard for the principle in Buenos Aires.

12.10 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) for giving Parliament an opportunity to ask questions before the event rather than after it. I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister, and her officials, for all her letters to me on technical subjects related to these matters.

I should like a number of issues to be on the agenda for Buenos Aires. First—I could not put this more succinctly—there is the question of shit in the Antarctic. There is a real problem of dirt destroying the pristine environment there. Secondly, can the agenda include the effect of sanctions on, in particular, Iraq and Iran? Having visited Iraq three years ago and spent a holiday in Iran last year, I know that those countries are emitting an enormous, disproportionate amount of filth into the atmosphere. If the west imposes sanctions, what can we expect other than the pollution of the whole environment?

I had the good fortune to secure Adjournment debates on both the red book on rare plants—my hon. Friend the Minister should have replied to that debate, but I make no complaint; she was in Luxembourg, and she knows what was said in response—and, on 1 July, on reefs. Could those issues also be put on the agenda?

Given that the conference will take place in Buenos Aires, the subject of the Falklands-Malvinas environment is bound to come up. According to this morning's press, it has been raised with the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson). I hope that the Minister who goes to Buenos Aires will be well prepared to discuss such delicate matters seriously.

12.13 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I join all who have spoken in congratulating the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), who presented his arguments with characteristic clarity and commitment. I thank him for providing us with a welcome opportunity to debate this subject.

The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) made an interesting point about our method of scrutinising agreements of this kind. I hope that the Minister and the Whip will note his comments, which raise major issues about the way in which we conduct our business.

Let me deal first with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman)—not because I necessarily agree with her, although I do not think that her account of the dissenting scientists at Kyoto, including the 54 Nobel prize winners, can be lightly dismissed. We should all welcome my hon. Friend's scepticism. She may well be a flat-earther, but she may be a Galileo. It is impossible for us—particularly those of us who are not scientists—to tell which she is. If she turns out to be a Galileo, it will be entirely characteristic for her to be a troublemaker, as Galileo was regarded as a troublemaker. Intolerance of dissenting voices smacks of insecurity in our own arguments, and we do not want that. Let us not resent debate: doubt, after all, is an integral part of the human condition. A former Conservative Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, wrote a whole treatise on the philosophical defence of doubt, and we should welcome our own doubts.

I am not a scientist; I am dependent on advice resulting from consensus, and I am struck by what we know for certain. There is no doubt, for instance, that various gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, have an effect on the climate. There is no doubt that the incidence of those gases in our atmosphere has increased. There is no doubt that those increases will continue unless we take action. There is no doubt that there has at least been a coincidence between an increase in global temperature and an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: as has been said, that has been proved by the evidence of glaciers. There is no doubt that the world's oceans act as carbon sinks, but cannot keep pace with the growth in emissions. There is little doubt that the global temperature has risen significantly over the past 40 years. I could go on, but I must be brief.

There is enough solid evidence to prove that the activities of man have an effect on climate change. There is plenty of room for scepticism and for challenging the more conventional arguments, but there is no room for complacency, given the scale of the challenge that the evidence seems to present. We are obliged to do something.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said in response to the statement by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, we welcome the Kyoto agreement. As was acknowledged then, it was an achievement that owed as much to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) as to the Secretary of State himself. From an environmental perspective, however, it was only half a loaf. The Secretary of State said that the protocol provided

"a number of measures that will help countries to achieve their targets. The measures include the possibility of trading in permits . . . limited allowances for absorption of carbon dioxide by forests . . . and provision for developed countries to gain credit by helping developing countries curb their emissions."—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1997; Vol. 303, c. 130.]

The danger of such measures is that they create the opportunity for fudge. We have heard a certain amount about the so-called window of credibility. How does the Minister see that operating, given that, as yet, many countries have not signed up to the protocol, and, as yet, there is no visible means of enforcement—or even a reasonable consensus about how to measure progress? Such concerns have been expressed by organisations at the more reputable end of the environmental spectrum, such as Friends of the Earth, and we are as keen for the arrangements to work as anyone else.

We come to the debate with a proud record on the environment. Ten years ago this September, the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said in an address to the Royal Society:

"environmental protection will be the most important global issue up to the end of this century."

How prophetic that was. It put this country at the forefront of the global environmental debate. It was followed by the 1989 White Paper, "This Common

Inheritance". It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that that common inheritance remains a subject of agreement between the two main parties and to look after it.

When we were in office, we made great progress on reducing carbon dioxide emissions. We introduced fiscal incentives on road fuel duties, to encourage the use of less polluting fuels. I remind the hon. Member for Islington, North that we secured substantial co-operation with the private sector through the advisory committee on business and the environment, first chaired by Sir John Collins of Shell. We demonstrated that industry and the Government can work together for the benefit of the environment and of businesses.

Markets are averse to risk. They are becoming increasingly wary of environmental risk. Investment will not be attracted to businesses with high environmental risk. All businesses are seeking to improve their environmental credentials as part of the workings of the market. Green markets are growing and green investment portfolios are developing and doing well.

The real question is how the Government will achieve their 20 per cent. target. Transport accounts for 25 per cent. of greenhouse gas emissions. There are problems of congestion, overuse of cars and inappropriate land use planning. The Government promised the transport White Paper in the spring. Why are we still waiting for it with bated breath halfway through July?

The greatest contribution to carbon dioxide emission reductions has been the cut in coal-fired power stations and the success of the non-fossil fuel obligation in promoting renewable energy. Where is the long-term strategy on low-carbon energy generation, particularly when the Government seem to have abandoned gas-fired power stations in the short term and are promoting coal? How can clean coal technology help to achieve the Government's CO_2 commitments?

The Government say that renewables should contribute 10 per cent. to the nation's energy resources, but we still have no idea when or how. Will the Government break with the anti-nuclear lobby? Nuclear power generation makes a major contribution to carbon-free power generation. What are the major achievements of our EU presidency in relation to Kyoto? What is the Government's strategy on the potential fudges in the Kyoto agreement? When will the Government explain how they will meet the commitment to achieve a 20 per cent. reduction? We are still waiting for the consultation document. When will it be issued? Their duty is to build on our achievements. We have heard much talk, but seen rather less action.

12.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) on initiating this lively and interesting debate, and all who have contributed to it.

Kyoto was a huge success—an historic turning point in the fight against climate change. However, it is only the first step in the process, for several reasons. First, much greater reductions in greenhouse gas emissions will inevitably be necessary in the longer term if we are to stabilise the increase in average global temperatures. We need 60 or 70 per cent. reductions rather than the 5 per cent. agreed at Kyoto. Secondly, as many hon. Members have said, Kyoto left a lot of unfinished business, such as establishing the rules and procedures for the flexible mechanisms in the protocol, for example on emissions trading. Thirdly, future commitments for developing countries are crucial to the ratification and implementation of the protocol. That issue must be addressed.

The latter two of those reasons are major issues which will take up much of the time of the climate change convention over the next few years, starting with the next conference of parties in Buenos Aires, but not ending there.

As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said at Kyoto, we now have a window of credibility before ratification to allow progress to be made on all those crucial issues, fleshing out the bones, but we have a lot to do. The early signs from the preparatory meetings in Bonn in June were that progress will be slow and that agreement on the key issues is unlikely at COP 4. We have told Argentina, the host nation, that we are ready to help in any way to ensure progress on those important issues at Buenos Aires.

The UK was to the fore in the negotiations at Kyoto, and we continued to lead efforts to tackle climate change during our presidency of the EU. As an early signal of our commitment, my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment signed the Kyoto protocol in New York on 29 April, on behalf of the European Union and the United Kingdom respectively.

At the June Environment Council, we secured agreement on how to share out the EU's 8 per cent. reduction target from Kyoto. Agreeing the deal was important for the EU's international credibility. The target is legally binding and it was important that it was shared out fairly. The UK agreed to a 12.5 per cent. reduction target. We have always made it clear that, while we shall retain our 20 per cent. aim, we shall not increase our legally binding target simply to allow others to do less than is justified. Four member states—Austria, Denmark, Germany and the UK—have national targets significantly above their legally binding targets. If those are met, Europe could do better than its 8 per cent. reduction target.

During our EU presidency, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment steered through the discussions on the EU position on the outstanding issues from Kyoto. They also featured at the Leeds castle meeting of G8 Environment Ministers earlier this year and at the Heads of Government meeting in Birmingham. EU preparations for the Buenos Aires conference will now be the responsibility of the Austrian presidency, but we shall continue to play a full part.

I should like to mention—all too briefly, I am afraid—the flexible mechanisms: emissions trading, the clean development mechanism and joint implementation. The EU supports the use of such flexible mechanisms, which can help to reduce developed countries' costs of emissions reductions. The clean development mechanism, which emerged as a new idea at Kyoto and was included in the protocol in outline, also has great potential for developing countries.

However, we have several concerns about flexible mechanisms. First, we must ensure that they operate effectively and efficiently and that they provide real and

[Angela Eagle]

verifiable benefits. Secondly, domestic action must be the main means of achieving emissions reductions for two reasons: domestic action allows us to make the changes to our economies and life styles that are necessary and achievable to tackle climate change in the longer term; and it demonstrates to developing countries our clear commitment to taking action, which we hope will help to persuade them to take on similar commitments eventually. That is why at Bonn the EU proposed a concrete ceiling on the emissions reductions that can be achieved through flexible mechanisms.

We also need to talk about compliance. The Kyoto protocol does not contain a mechanism, but it has a provision for a future conference to approve appropriate procedures. What should those procedures be? Should we seek to promote compliance or should we penalise non-compliance? I am no clairvoyant, but I foresee different views about that and some hard negotiating in the years ahead.

That brings me to the second of the major issues that I identified earlier: developing countries. If we are to limit climate change to acceptable levels—the EU has suggested a maximum temperature rise of 2 deg C and a CO_2 concentration of no more than 550 points per million, which is double the pre-industrial level, as a starting point for discussion—developed country emissions need to be reduced substantially and global emissions will eventually need to be reduced by 60 per cent. to 70 per cent.

We need to consider ways of engaging developing countries in the process. Two possibilities are being discussed. The first is to allow developing countries to take on reduction targets on a voluntary basis. The second is for a review of the obligations of parties under the climate change convention in the light of its ultimate objective. Such a review would need to consider what extra commitments would be necessary in the longer term. The EU favours the latter method. The review would need to be wide ranging and would have to recognise the legitimate needs and aspirations for economic growth in developing countries, the need to eradicate poverty and their common but differentiated responsibilities towards climate change. At the same time, it would need to address the question of quantifying the global objective of stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that avoided dangerous interference with the climate system, which is in all our interests. The interesting concept of contraction and convergence would be considered in such a review.

A time of fewer than eight minutes is hardly enough to talk about such fascinating and important issues.

Mr. Corbyn: Speak faster.

Angela Eagle: I could speak faster.

This has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate. I look forward to reporting to the House on future progress. We shall clearly return to the issue time and again.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It follows the Minister's comments. I am not being curmudgeonly in asking whether you would draw to Madam Speaker's attention, for her reflection, the development whereby Opposition spokesmen feel that it is incumbent on them to participate in Adjournment debates—in this case at longer length than the time left for the Minister to reply. Are not these Wednesday morning debates successors to Consolidated Fund debates, in which it was certainly the tradition that Back Benchers raised points and Ministers replied? I do not want to make this a yah-boo issue. It is a matter of Back-Bench rights rather than of getting at Front-Bench spokesmen.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): That is not a point of order. We must remember that any time spent on points of order simply takes time from the following debate.

Art Market

12.31 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): The British art market is large, competitive and successful. It employs nearly 51,000 people and has an annual turnover of more than £2.2 billion. Although some of the UK market is purely domestic, it is unique in Europe and probably pre-eminent in the world because it attracts buyers, sellers and works of art from all over the world. That international market is primarily based in London, and is one of the reasons why London is a world city of interest and vitality. The big auction houses, around which well-known dealers are clustered, are based in this city and throughout the west end. Support services, such as conservation, restoration, framing, printing, specialist services, freight, insurance and packing, which feed off the international market, are much more widely spread. Wider still, many provincial dealers and auctioneers, who form a vast network of businesses throughout the United Kingdom, benefit from such international traffic.

We are debating a major British asset which is similar to the City of London. Both markets are global in their outlook, and both face daily competition from alternative market centres. That is particularly true of art, which is a mobile commodity. A work of art does not have to be sold in London. A seller of a valuable picture, painting or sculpture will weigh up the advantages and comparative costs of selling the work in London, Geneva, Tokyo or New York. It is, therefore, very important that we do nothing to put the UK at a disadvantage—whether through unnecessary costs, regulation or taxes.

The UK art market, however, faces exactly such a threat. The threat comes in two parts. First, value added tax on most imported art is set to double next year from 2.5 to 5 per cent. The 2.5 per cent. rate was negotiated by the previous Government as a temporary derogation or concession which is due to run out in June. I have explained that we rely very much on art coming to this country for resale so, if we tax it—the doubling of VAT is certainly such a tax—dealers and sellers outside the European Union will simply send their art somewhere else. Instead of sending it for resale in London or somewhere else in the EU, they will divert the business to other world centres that are hungry to attract it. There is already evidence that, even at the lower concessionary 2.5 per cent. rate, such diversion is happening. Over the past year, the volume of art entering the UK has fallen by 22 per cent. compared with the volume before the VAT rate was imposed in the mid-1990s. If we double VAT on imported art, the damage will be great.

I ask the Government to fight at least to retain the lower rate for the UK and, if possible, to extend its imposition. I and the art trade generally have no wish to be in a privileged position in the EU. The art trade thinks that it can earn that position through its skills and enterprise. It would be entirely happy for the rest of the EU also to have a lower rate of VAT on art imports. Why cannot the European Union for once go for the low-tax solution instead of endlessly harmonising tax upwards, which simply renders the EU uncompetitive in world terms?

I do not underestimate the difficulties of achieving that solution; it would require unanimous agreement among member states. We are not asking them for additional payments or resources. We are simply asking that they agree on a lower permitted rate of VAT on imports. The French in particular may be allies in achieving that. Christie's is being bought by a Frenchman who—we are told—has personal contacts with the President of France. Will the Minister ensure that that and other avenues are pursued and that, in particular, other member states and the European Commission are made aware of the damage already done to Europe by VAT? London is not just a British city; it is a European Union city. Other member states should understand and have sympathy for retaining the successful global position of a European asset.

The second threat facing the British art market comes from a European Union directive to impose droit de suite—artists' resale right—on all member states. Under droit de suite, if a work of art is resold, a percentage of the price is supposed to be collected by an agency and paid to the artist or his heirs for up to 70 years after his death. That is the theory, but, in practice, collection costs are very high and very little money tends to be collected, especially for poorer or less well-known artists. The resale of any valuable work of art tends to take place in an underground world so that no levy can be collected—or worse, the sale is transferred abroad to centres where droit de suite does not apply. Someone selling a Picasso or a Matisse, faced with having to pay a levy in London, will simply not sell it here. The sale will be transferred to Geneva, New York or one of the other centres.

British sellers of art who are already based here will take their works elsewhere as well. Works will not be exchanged through the auction houses or other dealers in the United Kingdom, but transported to other centres where the levy does not apply. If that happens, the artist will get nothing out of it; the auction sales will simply take place in other centres. Christie's and Sotheby's already have American assets and conduct many sales in New York. Their owners will not suffer, but the people working for them in London will. The office staff, the experts, the porters, packers and other employees will lose their jobs. All the dealers who rely on the international traffic will either shut down or transfer to New York.

The proposal is crazy, damaging and short-sighted—but it is a real threat, because, although I would regard it as a tax matter, which should, therefore, be decided by unanimity, the European Commission has ensured that it is categorised as a trade matter, and so can be imposed on us by majority vote. The Commission is supported by France and Germany, which already have droit de suite.

The basic failure has been the failure to see that tax harmonisation is making the European Union uncompetitive in world terms. What is the point of extending a levy and imposing it on the United Kingdom, when the beneficiaries will be not other member states, or even the European Union in general, but the New York art market? The proposal is entirely barmy.

The Minister has a good reputation for understanding the issue and for fighting our corner. I hope that he will be able to tell us what he has been doing to act on his concerns about the matter and to find allies elsewhere in the European Union. I hope that he will be able to show us that the Government as a whole have a policy to deal with the problem. It should have been raised during the British presidency of the EU; perhaps it was. If so, I should like a report on what happened. After all, the Government say that they have tremendous influence in Europe; let them turn that into practical action.

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

The art market is certainly united. The British Art Market Federation has been campaigning hard on behalf of all sectors of the art market, and its president, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), is attending the debate. I hope that he will contribute to it in a moment or two.

As so often happens, responsibility for the issue in Government tends to be a little fragmented. The Treasury is responsible for VAT, so I hope that it is pursuing the threat to double the rate of VAT on most imported art. The Department of Trade and Industry deals with droit de suite and has been monitoring progress on the directive which, to my regret, has already been through the Council of Ministers once. It has also been through the European Parliament, which agreed and authorised it with a few suggested amendments.

The directive is now due to come back to the Council of Ministers, and it is crucial that, by that point, we have made allies of several other member states that either do not have droit de suite and may, therefore, regard it as a threat, or for other reasons realise that the interests of the European Union as a whole require us not to extend the principle to countries where it does not now apply.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should certainly not only have a watching brief on the health and vitality of the art market, but vigorously fight its corner within Government and more generally. I hope that the House is united behind the case I have outlined. What we need from the Government is an equivalent united and determined high-level campaign to defend a British success story and a vital British asset.

12.44 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), whose debate this is, and to the Minister, for their kindness in letting me intervene. I declare an unremunerated interest in the Register of Members' Interests as president of the British Antique Dealers Association and also of the British Art Market Federation, which was created in the final year of the Conservative Government so that the Government—which primarily means, as my right hon. Friend said, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Treasury—could have a single body to deal with on behalf of the British art market, much of which is concentrated in my constituency.

It is not for me to say why I was invited to take on the role, but I was the Minister responsible for Customs and Excise in the mid-1980s, and was, therefore, involved in a long saga about VAT and the art market at that time. Latterly, I was also the Secretary of State in what is now the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells has been eloquent in his comments on the problems, and in this brief intervention, I will confine myself to observations on our interface with the European Union. First, the art trade in the other European countries envies us the quality of the relationship in this country between the trade and the Government. In that respect, I commend the Minister, who has won golden opinions for the robustness with which he stands up for our interests.

However, I am afraid that the envy of others draws attention to the inability of their trade to educate their Governments, and thus the Commission, about the art market. My right hon. Friend's pamphlet contains an illuminating exchange between the British Art Market Federation and the Director-General in Brussels. The Director-General turned aside our anxieties by saying that only the major auction houses were concerned—whereas in fact, the major auction houses are the only parties involved that are protected against those considerations by virtue of the fact that they have businesses in Switzerland and the United States as well.

Secondly, the Governments affected in some other European countries, unlike our Departments here, do not work out a common position, as has happened in the past and as I hope is happening now.

Thirdly, it is important not to drive the art market out to the United States and Switzerland, because essentially this glory belongs to Europe, and sending it offshore does Europe no good. I shall finish with a quotation from Burke:

"the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever."

We have every confidence in the Minister as our champion.

12.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): I thank the right hon. Members for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) for their kind remarks about me as the Minister who co-ordinates Government activity in this area. I am not sure whether I got that job on the basis of my skill and knowledge of the industry, or because I am the same size as Toulouse-Lautrec. Whatever the reason was, I have committed myself with some gusto to work with hon. Members on both sides of the House and throughout the Government to try to resolve the issues in a positive and effective way.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wells on his success in the ballot. The debate is, indeed, timely; there has been much press coverage lately about the art market, and the right hon. Gentleman has had some hand in that by publishing his pamphlet, "A Market under Threat". I welcomed the opportunity for our officials in Government to work with the right hon. Gentleman in the process of developing his arguments in the pamphlet, which has brought a greater knowledge of the issues at stake to a wider group of people. Now there is wider coverage of the issues; no longer simply the art markets talking among themselves or to the Government.

The Government have made their position on the art market clear several times. Lord Haskel spoke about the resale right and import VAT on works of art in a debate in the other place last December. Indeed, this is the fourth debate to take place since the Commission tabled its proposals for resale a little over two years ago. Numerous parliamentary questions have been asked, and the Government have done all that we can to make our position clear not only to Parliament, but to all concerned.

Policy towards the Commission's proposal to harmonise the resale right has not changed. Like the previous Government, we do not want to be compelled to introduce the right. The Commission's proposals are

misconceived, and we have said so many times. We oppose them and want to see them defeated. As for the seventh VAT directive, that is a legacy which we inherited.

I understand the concern of the right hon. Member for Wells for the future of the art market. I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to restate the Government's position on the resale right, to update the House on developments and to deal briefly with import VAT on works of art. Value added tax can be a complex and difficult subject, as the right hon. Gentleman will know from his time as a Treasury Minister. Although VAT is, of course, a Treasury responsibility, my Department has an interest in its impact.

The seventh VAT directive is a particularly complex package, which is not confined to VAT on imports of art and antiques. The Government are aware that the temporary derogation won by the United Kingdom to levy an effective rate of 2.5 per cent. on art imports—instead of the otherwise harmonised minimum of 5 per cent.—was welcomed at the time by the trade. However, we are aware also of concerns expressed since then about the apparent impact of that VAT change. We are conscious of the trade's anxiety about the possible consequences of further changes after June 1999—the time when the United Kingdom derogation from the harmonised minimum rate of 5 per cent. expires.

When the seventh VAT directive was agreed, an undertaking was secured that the European Commission should provide the Council of Ministers, by the end of 1998, with a report on the impact of the relevant provisions of the directive on the competitiveness of the Community's art markets in relation to third-country art markets. The Government take this issue very seriously, and place considerable importance on that undertaking. The United Kingdom will take an active part in the review, and will ensure that the British art trade's concerns are heard.

On relations with the French, officials have been in contact with their counterparts in France about a range of issues arising from the seventh directive. We expect the discussions to continue as the Commission review progresses. The Government have urged, and will continue to urge, the Commission not to press ahead with the resale right proposal without due regard to the VAT review. Unlike the Commission, we do not believe that artists' resale rights and import VAT should be considered separately. It is important to know what the combined effect will be on competitiveness.

The Government are in no doubt that the Commission's proposal on artists' resale rights would damage the international competitiveness of the London art market. It would result in trade switching from London, not to other European capitals, but to New York and Switzerland—as the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster indicated—and as far afield as Hong Kong and other centres where the right does not exist. According to estimates made by my Department, British auctioneers and dealers could lose earnings of up to £68 million per annum, resulting in 5,000 job losses.

The European Parliament has, to some extent, recognised the danger of the Commission's proposal. Parliament adopted the original proposal on First Reading—albeit with 28 amendments, some of which were designed to limit the impact on international sales. The Commission has now produced an amended version, incorporating 21 of the Parliament's amendments in whole or in part.

One of the Parliament's amendments rejected by the Commission would have based the royalty on profit rather than selling price, with a lower threshold and a lower rate for higher-priced works. That would have reduced vendors' costs—a step in the right direction, although not enough to prevent damage to European Community art markets. New recital 5a of the proposal calls on the Commission to seek an international agreement on droit de suite. Clearly, concerns about displacement of sales would be removed if the EU's main trading partners also adopted the resale right. Unfortunately, international agreement is unlikely to happen in the time scale of the directive, if at all. In the meantime, our markets would be lost.

The Government have been successful in focusing the debate in Brussels on the economic impact of the resale right. The Commission's amended proposal was introduced at the one meeting on this subject under our presidency. It enabled the opponents of harmonisation to draw attention to studies made by my Department. Those have been circulated to all member states. We have called on member states to make, and to make available, cost-benefit analyses of their own.

We even have offered to help the Commission to prepare an impact assessment, although this offer has not been taken up. We will continue to press the offer on it. There is growing recognition among member states about the potential damage to the international competitiveness of Community art markets, and there is a realisation that the overall economy of the EU could be damaged. Nevertheless, most member states continue to favour harmonisation. Only the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands are opposed, although most member states have some difficulty with the wording of the proposal.

The Government will continue to discuss with colleagues in a proactive way the need for them to consider seriously the arguments we have put about the the damaging impact that the Commission's proposals would have on the European market. The Government support the internal market, but harmonisation must bring a genuine benefit to business and commerce. The proposal simply tilts the competitive advantage in favour of non-EU countries.

Harmonisation, if it is needed, would be better achieved by abolition of the right. However, we recognise that some member states have had the right for a long time. They do not want to give it up, and we have no wish to force them to do so. Equally, the Government do not see why the right should be imposed on us. The case for harmonisation has not been made, but the threat to a significant European Community market—the UK art market—is clear. The Government will continue vigorously to oppose this damaging proposal.

The Commission contends that its proposals for a banded royalty system, under which the royalty rate would be lower than the highest sale price, would avoid displacement risks. The Government disagree. For high-value works, the cost of the resale right would greatly outweigh the costs of sending works overseas to be sold, as well as discouraging the import of works for sale in London. However, the Commission is not entirely insensitive to the concerns and has chosen to incorporate the Parliament's new recital 5a in the amended proposal.

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

It is not possible to predict if and when a common position will be reached. Even if a common position is agreed, it is not possible to predict whether what has been agreed by the Council of Ministers under qualified majority voting would be acceptable to the European Parliament under the co-decision procedure. Currently, it is not yet clear whether there would be a qualified majority in favour of the proposal as it stands. Although those member states opposed to the measure in principle fall short of a blocking minority—for example, 26 votes—some other member states have problems with certain aspects of the proposal. In the meantime, we will continue to argue strongly against harmonisation.

We will not give up on the matter. We will have positive dialogue—if necessary, on a one-to-one basis—to persuade our colleagues of the rightness of our case in respect not just of the UK market but, as has been mentioned, the ripple effect across the whole market of offering a competitive advantage to those outside the market. That was the never the purpose of the single market harmonisation proposals. They were about giving benefit to those within the Community—not to those outside it.

The Government know the importance of listening to industry. It is central to our policies that we should develop partnerships and work together. Shortly after taking office, Ministers met representatives of the art trade. We understand their concerns for London's future as a leading international art market. We have made it clear to them and to others that we will continue our opposition and that we will maintain a regular dialogue.

I make this offer to the right hon. Members for Wells and for Cities of London and Westminster. I have an open-door policy on the matter. If, after today, there are matters that I have not covered which they want to discuss—for example, internal market distortion issues, which it has not been possible to discuss in the time allowed—I should be more than happy to meet them collectively or individually. It is in all our interests to pool all our intellectual and Government resources to get a victory in the case that we have positively and eloquently put on behalf of the UK industry.

I would genuinely welcome the opportunity to work with both right hon. Members and the industry to try to ensure that the matter is resolved positively, and that there are none of the damaging effects that some people are trying to impose on our industry.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am most grateful for the Minister's positive response. We will do all that we can to get the trade to respond to his generous open-door policy. I was particularly pleased to hear him say that he regards the VAT threat and the droit de suite threat as two sides of the same coin, because the competitiveness and position of the British art market depend on the seeing-off of both those threats. The Minister clearly will not let them be picked off one by one; he regards them as a single issue. I am somewhat encouraged by the Minister's reply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I understood that the right hon. Gentleman wanted to intervene; he must not make another speech. Does the Minister want to respond to that intervention?

Mr. McCartney: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because of our common approach, I completed my remarks to give the right hon. Gentleman the opportunity to wind up, even though this is an Adjournment debate. I should have said that I was sitting down, but I now sit down again.

Northampton (Train Services)

12.59 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I very much appreciate the opportunity to put the case for better train services to Northampton. I do so not only as the Member of Parliament for Northampton, North and a sometimes disgruntled train passenger, but as chair of the Northampton rail users group, which campaigns for better train services. In that capacity, I pay tribute to both Railtrack and Silverlink for their commitment and good grace in regularly meeting the group and in supporting our efforts to promote the cause of rail transport. We want faster, more comfortable and more reliable trains, yet current plans for the rail network mean that we may not see any real improvements in our lifetime—indeed, the service may become even worse.

In terms of everything that the Government want to do for economic development, transport and housebuilding, Northampton is a town of great strategic importance; it has enormous potential and the skills, talents and resources to expand and excel. It has had to reinvent itself economically several times. It has been a market town and a boot and shoe town; it is now a distribution centre and, increasingly, a financial services centre of some importance.

Because Northampton is, literally, at the crossroads of the country—it is situated where the M6 meets the M1—it has established itself as an important distribution centre for road transport. However, it is not a centre for rail transport, as freight trains go straight through Northampton to the DIRFT inland rail freight terminal further north. Indeed, inter-city trains have the misfortune to be diverted on to the Northampton loop only because of main line engineering works; people frequently tell me—in a bad mood—that they have passed through my constituency because their train service was delayed owing to engineering works.

If the Government seriously want to get people off the road and on to public transport, which I completely support, they would make great progress if they persuaded people in Northampton to use the trains rather than to belt up and down the motorway. I confess to being an offender myself; if one needs reliable transport, one has to use the roads because of the problems with the train service.

Northampton is a growth point. It has a population of almost 250,000, and it is projected to grow by a further 30,000 households in the coming years, which means that an additional 120,000 people will live in the catchment area of Northampton station. That represents a huge growth in population, which must bring jobs if it is to succeed. It must also bring the high-quality public transport links that will be so necessary for the new millennium.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I applaud my hon. Friend and the rail users group for continually raising this issue. Does she agree that there can be few towns of the size that we are talking about—200,000 plus—that do not have access to a main line station? Despite all the efforts of Silverlink, unless such access is given, commuters and travellers will continue to be dissatisfied.

Ms Keeble: Yes. That has been a constant cause of complaint, not only by the rail users group but by the many people who use the trains from Northampton to travel to London or Birmingham and who face extremely long journey times on uncomfortable trains.

I have no doubt that, without high-quality public transport links—trains—the town's economy will be stunted and our ability to fashion for ourselves a good future will be limited. Equally important, a good train service is essential for people in Northampton in their day-to-day lives. People who travel to Milton Keynes, London or Birmingham for business or pleasure currently have to try to tolerate the intolerable.

The easiest campaigning that I have ever done has been on the train service. People are more than willing to give their views, and the complaints are overwhelming: the trains are dirty and uncomfortable; they lack basic facilities, so that people cannot even get a drink of water, let alone a cup of the old British Rail coffee; and above all, trains run late or—even when they run on time—take too long.

My hon. Friend the Minister may say that Silverlink is the most improved train service—an average of 92 per cent. of trains arrive on time—but, like many people I know, I seem to spend much time travelling on the other 8 per cent. The most spectacular lapse in service that I suffered occurred when I was travelling to Northampton to speak at a press conference encouraging people to use public transport. There was a points failure on the main line before we got on to the Northampton loop. The train was diverted to Rugby and, by the time I arrived in Birmingham, the event was long since over.

My argument is not with Silverlink, even though, from time to time, I have criticisms of it; Northampton's train problems are much more deep seated. When the railways were built, Northampton was left out, as the Minister knows well—he has strong family links with the town. The canal owners refused to sell the land that would have enabled the main line to come through Northampton. The current franchise structure is wrong, and we did not benefit from the previous upgrading of the main line. Moreover, like the whole network, we have suffered as a result of the lack of investment under the previous Government and their failure to fashion a future in which public transport could become the mainstream of transport.

Complaints about the current service are short-term grumbles, however; they are as nothing compared to the long-term grievances that people have as a result of the plans to upgrade the west coast main line. Any improvement to the rail network is, of course, welcome, as are new ways in which to attract investment into that essential piece of infrastructure. Many towns on the line will benefit, although some—Milton Keynes is one—also have reservations about what is happening. My wish is that Northampton receives its share of the benefits, but I fear—indeed, I expect—that, unless the Government offer strategic direction, there will be a worsening of rail services to the town.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Many of the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) and for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke) work in Milton Keynes, so it is in Milton Keynes's interests that the rail link to Northampton is improved. This is not a question of

[Mr. Brian White]

Northampton versus Milton Keynes or Rugby; an upgrading of the service is in the interests of most towns on the line.

Ms Keeble: My hon. Friend is right to say that we have a common interest. As out-of-London development grows and more substantial employment and industrial centres are built up, transport links between our towns will become increasingly important, so I am grateful for the support of Milton Keynes.

The passenger upgrade scheme—PUG 2, as it is called—will affect both Northampton and Milton Keynes. It is an agreement between Railtrack and Virgin, which balances the need for investment with the need to protect the public interest. That is the tightrope that the rail regulator had to walk in his recent report and, although I see the merits of many of his arguments, I believe that many more public interest guarantees are needed, certainly for Northampton and possibly even for Milton Keynes.

Under the plans, the service to Northampton could become slower—I should say even slower. Eleven of the 14 slots an hour on the fast line will go exclusively to Virgin, and it seems that the remaining three slots will go to the highest bidder, with no assurance that Northampton trains will have a look in or be able to afford them.

The service to Northampton could become less frequent. The rail regulator has talked about maintaining the passenger service requirement, but that included only one train an hour during peak hours and one off peak. In contrast, Silverlink is to be congratulated on running three trains an hour during peak hours and four off peak. If we were to get the approved number of trains, as set out in the requirement, we would get far fewer than at present.

Silverlink is in a weak position to compete. Its franchise runs for only seven and a half years, as opposed to the 15 years given to other train companies, so it has no certainty that it will still be running the service after 2005.

No doubt my hon. Friend the Minister will point to the present review, ordered by the rail regulator, to consider faster services for Northampton, but I share the general scepticism about that review. There is no strategic direction on what it must achieve, and it is obliged to produce only a report, not results. It is being tacked on to an in-principle agreement between the rail regulator and the richest and most powerful transport conglomerate in the entire country. At the very least, it should have preceded the in-principle decision.

There is no commitment to extra money for infrastructure improvements; there is an obligation to include discussion of it, but no indication of where the money is to come from or whether it will be provided. There is no commitment to extending the franchise period or giving Silverlink the investment incentives that delivered the agreement with Virgin. The review is investigating how to get Northampton trains to travel faster on slow lines with loops in them. Some of us suspect that the loops could become parking bays.

The review team could simply say that it had fulfilled its mandate to review the position, but that it was not possible to get the trains travelling any faster. The review starts from too low a base and contains no vision or guarantees for the future of transport for Northampton.

I seek four commitments. The first and most important is a guarantee that the Northampton train service will have access to two of the hourly slots that are left on the fast lines on the west coast main line. Without that, the service could be consigned to the slow lane of history.

Secondly, if the company concerned—at present, Silverlink—cannot afford to pay the access fees for those lines, which will be extremely lucrative and expensive, the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising should consider providing financial support or at least facilitating arrangements such as those that have made the main line upgrade possible.

Thirdly, the franchise period should be extended, to encourage investment in the Northampton services, including trains of inter-city standard. I am well aware that my hon. Friend the Minister could say that many of the short-term grumbles, such as no tables and uncomfortable seating, are entirely matters for Silverlink, but if the company cannot look beyond five more years, it is unlikely to make the investment needed for better trains. I hardly need draw the political comparison about interest in long-term futures that stretch beyond five years.

Fourthly, we need a modest upgrade of the Northampton loop, so that it can take trains travelling at 100 mph, instead of their being stuck at the present 75 mph. As rail travel expands, and people see the standards that can be achieved in train services both here and abroad, they will feel extremely dissatisfied with a very slow train without amenities, especially with journey times that are proportionately far longer than, say, travelling from London to Paris, which used to be a huge journey and now takes only a few hours, while we could still take an hour to get to Northampton in—who knows?—50 years' time.

Those four commitments would ensure that train services from Northampton came in from the cold, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reply in some detail about them. We need those assurances, before a final seal of approval is given to the Virgin-Railtrack deal, if we in Northampton are to have confidence in our rail service. The benefits of the west coast main line upgrade will be felt only in several years' time and, given that there is likely to be disruption to the services as the work is done, we need to know now that we will share in those benefits.

The document issued by the rail regulator setting out his support for the Virgin-Railtrack deal talked much about the reasonable requirements and expectations of people in Northampton. It is not reasonable to expect people in Northampton to put up with inferior trains with no tables, fewer litter bins, and no possibility of even getting a drink of water, when the journey takes two hours instead of one—that is not even safe, let alone comfortable—and to wait longer for fewer trains to take them home from work or from a day out shopping in Milton Keynes, London or Birmingham.

Nor is it reasonable for people in Northampton to have to put up with journey times to London of an hour, when, in future, trains from Rugby, for example, will take just over half an hour to do a much longer journey. That is calculated to drive people off the trains and onto the ever more congested motorways.

Underlining all the work that the rail users groups in Northampton and in Milton Keynes have done is a real commitment to the future of the railways and to ensuring

that more people use them, to ease the congestion that snarls up the M1 and is especially bad south of Northampton. There is little prospect of any other measure to relieve the pressures.

Since my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £2 billion extra spending on transport yesterday, I should like to put in an early bid for some of that money, to underwrite the cost of providing Northampton with a better train service. The people of Northampton have a right to expect a better train service, and I hope that the Government will give a commitment that, at long last, the town will get the fast, efficient and comfortable train service that people have a right to expect.

1.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on securing this debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss the west coast main line, and Northampton services in particular. As she knows, the subject is not within my normal ministerial responsibility, and I am replying on behalf of my fellow Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), who is out of the country. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North will understand that I will not be able to give a full response to all her specific points, but I will ask my colleague to write to her on matters that I cannot cover.

I am sure that all hon. Members present will agree that the current state of the west coast main line is far from satisfactory and is a clear example of the previous Government's consistent failure to promote the vital rail links that are so important to industry and the travelling public. It is scandalous that the plans for the much-needed enhancement of the line have taken so long to put in place.

I know that hon. Members who use the line have had to endure a service that offers poor standards of punctuality and reliability. I find it hard to believe that Britain's busiest mixed railway, providing about 2,000 trains day, carrying both passengers and freight, linking London and the industrial and business centres of Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow, should still be running on infrastructure that was last modernised in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That is why I welcome the recent agreement between Railtrack and Virgin. I hope that it will provide for people who travel and live along the route a railway that is fit for the 21st century and will encourage those who currently drive between the cities that it serves to choose instead to make those journeys by rail.

Having said that, some aspects of the upgrading are not universally popular, and I applaud my hon. Friend's commitment to highlighting the concerns that exist over the deal. Along with my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) and for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke), who spoke briefly in the debate, she has met my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State to discuss those concerns, and she has also spoken to the rail regulator.

Clearly, not everyone along the route will benefit from the improvements offered by the upgrade. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that some services may deteriorate. As we know, this is not a perfect world and, in making major changes to such an intensively used railway, it will not be possible to meet everyone's aspirations. In planning such a major upgrade, it is important that full account is taken of the needs and aspirations of everyone who has a legitimate interest in it. The arrangements that the previous Government put in place for managing the railway simply do not allow that. They certainly do not ensure that major schemes such as the west coast main line are planned as part of the strategic development of the railway system as a whole.

The agreement to upgrade the line involved two private sector companies, which planned an upgrade that would meet their own requirements. It appears that only after those requirements were met was thought given to the other operators on the line, or the wider needs of the community along the route. Indeed, early drafts of the agreement between Railtrack and Virgin—which were submitted to the regulator for approval—contained no provision for growth in freight services and proposed a deterioration in journey times between London and Northampton. It is not surprising that my hon. Friends who have taken part in the debate were incensed when they discovered that that was the implication of the proposals. I am sure that they and other hon. Members who take an interest in the subject will not be surprised because Virgin Trains—the company for which the upgrade is being produced—does not run freight trains; nor does it serve Northampton, so it had no interest in the concerns of the people represented by my hon. Friends in the Northampton area.

Only the intervention of the rail regulator and the franchising director, together with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, ensured that improved capacity will now be available for freight and that services to and from Northampton will be protected. I realise that that may seem like too little too late, and I recognise that Northampton feels disadvantaged because of the shortage of fast services.

My hon. Friend has made the case eloquently on behalf of her constituents and highlighted the lack of easy access to fast main line rail services. She mentioned the history and the fact that canal operators opposed a direct line to Northampton in the early to mid-19th century, when lines were first being built. Another element, of which she may be aware, was the interest of the Duke of Wellington and others concerned with military factors that the main line served the Weedon barracks, rather than Northampton. It is a curious history in which all of us who are familiar with that part of the world take an interest, but, whatever the history, the result is that Northampton is poorly served for a town of its size and importance because it has no direct access to fast main line services.

The regulator has sought assurances that Railtrack will be able to provide, as a minimum, capacity that can broadly accommodate the existing rights of Silverlink services between London and Northampton including maintaining existing journey times for fast peak-time London-to-Northampton trains. In addition, Railtrack has agreed to undertake a strategic review of passenger services south of Rugby in consultation with key stakeholders, including local authorities. Railtrack is due to report in April 1999, and meetings have already taken place with representatives from the train operator Silverlink and Northamptonshire county council to

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

discuss those issues. I have no doubt that my hon. Friends will contribute to that review, if they have not already done so.

I am sure that all hon. Members here today would agree that that is not the right way to go about planning a £2.2 billion infrastructure project. The west coast main line is both a major project and a major step towards making the railways fit for the 21st century. The potential of the project for inter-city services, the potential impact on local services and the resulting need to achieve a delicate balance of interests illustrate the need for a more strategic approach to be taken to the provision and management of the railways. That is why the Government plan to create a strategic rail authority, which will have responsibility for planning Britain's rail network and ensuring that plans are put in place that take proper account of the needs of everyone who uses the line.

The authority will provide the leadership and direction that the industry needs. It will combine the functions currently carried out by the franchising director and some of those carried out by the Department. In addition, it will be responsible for balancing the needs of passengers and freight users, and it will play a major part in promoting and facilitating integrated transport networks.

In addition to tackling the need for better strategic planning of the railways, we have secured more than £100 million of public support for the rail industry in the next three years as part of the comprehensive spending review settlement announced yesterday. That is designed to lever in additional private sector investment aimed at removing capacity constraints and promoting modal shift to rail. Spending plans for railways, including the new money for rail investment, underpin the Government's overriding goal of attracting more passengers and freight on to rail. There will be further details in the integrated transport White Paper, which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister intends to present to the House in the near future. I heard the early bid of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North on behalf of her town. She was certainly aware of the scope for that increased investment in improvements to the rail service. She will realise that I cannot give the commitment for which she is looking, but, as I said at the beginning of my speech, I will ensure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State writes to her about that and the other matters she raised.

I wish to reassure all hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Northampton, North, for Northampton, South and for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), who contributed to the debate, that we will continue to ensure that the west coast main line project is delivered by Railtrack and that the interests of all those who use the network—including Northampton passengers and freight users and people who travel between, for example, Northampton and Milton Keynes—are given adequate weight in the assessment of priorities. We know that that will be difficult under the current rules, but we aim to rectify the deficiencies that we inherited from the old system and work towards ensuring that the new rail authority will help to deliver a truly integrated transport system.

Fishing Industry (Safety)

1.27 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): First, I thank the Minister for her presence. I appreciate that her colleague, the Under-Secretary of Sate for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), who is responsible for shipping matters and would normally deal with such matters, is absent. I ensured that her office was aware of the questions that I intended to raise, very much in the spirit of co-operation as I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House want to ensure that the matter is taken forward to the benefit of the safety of lives at sea in the fishing industry.

I requested the debate with many misgivings as it will place in the public domain private tragedy and grief, but I hope and think that we are coming together in a shared belief that progress needs to be made in the protection of life at sea in the industry.

Last Sunday was sea Sunday, and I was asked to compere a Carolaire in the village where I was born and brought up—Mullion on the Lizard peninsula. We have grown used to tragedy and accustomed to the enormity of grief in the fishing industry. Traditionally, fishing communities come together at times when men are lost at sea. The families of those who are lost experience great solace and comfort from such support and companionship.

However, the world is changing, and the industry has altered greatly compared with the one I remember from my boyhood. Boats go further and are more sophisticated at catching and detecting fish. Fishermen have access to increasingly accurate weather forecasts that help them to plan days or weeks in advance. Most boats have highly sophisticated communications and sonar equipment. Satellite equipment is increasingly being added. Boats have acquired the belts and braces of vastly improved safety technology, including automatically released sonar beacons and life rafts with hydrostatic release units.

Despite that sophistication, and despite technological improvements, loss of life at sea in the fishing industry is high. Last year, 7,809 vessels were engaged in the fishing industry, the lowest figure on record. However, more lives were lost at sea than at any time during the past five years. In a recent parliamentary answer from the Under-Secretary responsible for shipping, I was told that 19 men were lost in 1995, 20 in 1996 and 29 in 1997. I do not want to debate sanitised, impersonal statistics. The Minister will agree that we risk sanitised and impersonal solutions if we fail to recognise that those figures represent real-life human tragedy and grief caused by, among other things, inadequate safeguards in the fishing industry.

Within the past 18 months, 10 men have been lost at sea from my constituency: William Pirrie, Steven Cooper, Philip Benney from the St. Ives-based Gorah Lass in March 1997; Simon Adams lost from a Newlyn trawler, the Prevail, in the western approaches in September 1997; Chris Cripps of Porthleven lost from the Ocean Spray off the Isles of Scilly on 28 October 1997; Robbie Holmes, Vince Marshall, John Todd and his son Kerry Todd when the Margaretha Maria was lost 70 miles south of the Lizard after leaving Newlyn on 11 November 1997; and Joslin Basher of St. Keverne, who was lost from the Heart of Oak, a gill-netter from Helford, within site of land off

the Lizard in April of this year. Those 10 men left 22 children without a father. That is surely the cause for a major inquiry.

Many issues arise from those cases. I have spoken to the Shipping Minister several times, and I know that a consultation paper is being produced. Can the Under-Secretary say when that will be published? The industry, and the families of those who have died, are keen to see lessons learned from the tragedies.

When the Margaretha Maria went down, sea conditions were calm, visibility good and the weather fair. The trawler, which had a highly experienced crew, was lost with no sign on the surface. Its life rafts did not inflate, and its emergency position-indicating radio beacons—sonar beacons known as EPIRBs—did not operate. Such beacons also failed in the case of the Gorah Lass. EPIRBs are fitted at considerable expense as a potential saviour in the worst-case scenario of a rapid sinking, when they are supposed to alert rescue services. Clearly, that is not always so. One Newlyn fisherman commented recently that they give a one in three chance—they may go off and a search be launched, they may go off and be deemed a false alarm, or they may fail to go off at all.

The second problem in the Margaretha Maria case was the difficulty of locating the vessel. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is aware of that problem, and I am glad to see him here. He is also aware of the commercial pressures on the industry, which force fishermen to be secretive about their most productive fishing grounds. That was one of the factors that made the tragedy of the Margaretha Maria more difficult to deal with. The Minister also knows of questions about the stability of fishing vessels and the increasingly heavy gear that some older boats are taking on deck. The marine accidents investigation branch will doubtless learn lessons from the tragic cases that I have mentioned.

I understand that it is customary in Scotland for the lives of men to be insured, as well as the vessel itself. That is not always the case elsewhere. The owners of the Margaretha Maria have received the money for the loss of their trawler, but the men were not insured. The mother of two of the three men lost from its sister trawler, Provider, on 6 November 1995 wrote:

"For about ten days after Provider disappeared the weather was reasonably fair for the time of year but no search was made to locate the boat, even though, in the case of the Provider, there was a definite location for the search. This was because the contract to search was 'put out to tender' by the boat's insurers,—that's how it was done. We were devastated. It seemed that the lives—and deaths—of these hard-working men were of no consequence. Had such a tragedy occurred on land an immediate search would have been instigated."

The involvement of the Ministry of Defence in searches for vessels is voluntary. It has no duty to assist. I urged the MoD several times to send surveillance planes to the site where we believed the Margaretha Maria to be. After the body of the skipper was found by a trawler in the area, I pleaded with the MoD to send vessels to search the area. However, the Ministry's involvement is voluntary, not a duty. When search and rescue helicopters do go out, they do not have the infra-red, heat-seeking equipment that could help them to locate men in the water.

The recovery of bodies lost at sea is a difficult matter. I have spoken several times to the Minister responsible for shipping about it as families feel very strongly on the subject. The Government's position is—although we await their consultation paper—that the sea is a dignified grave for a mariner. However, the Minister will understand that families want to bring their grieving to a close. The sea is not an undignified grave, but a proper funeral is love's last act. Families need that, and are in some cases demanding it. I support those who want a change in the Government's view, and we shall debate that point in the months to come. A lot of soul searching is required. It is not that I am arguing with the Minister because I know that our debate will be co-operative. Where practical, and where there is no threat to the lives of searchers, we must consider the matter. The technology has moved on from the days when the tradition was not to recover bodies from the sea.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The hon. Gentleman puts the case fairly. No one would argue that bodies should be recovered in every possible instance. There may be many circumstances in which they cannot be recovered. Equally, there are some in which they can. We need an organisation to judge the appropriate response to a family's request. Families find that, without such an organisation, they operate in a vacuum. The Sapphire was raised by the petition and fund-raising efforts of the families involved. Through their efforts in raising it and recovering their loved ones for Christian burial ashore, valuable information about the causes of the sinking was found that could not otherwise have come to light. That has already been reflected in the report of the marine accidents investigation branch.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to our attention. The recovery of the Sapphire provided evidence helpful to the MAIB investigation. The Margaretha Maria lies a good deal further offshore, 70 miles south of the Lizard in more than 300 ft of water. It would be a highly expensive operation, but the families are determined to consider it. They are raising funds to consider whether it is a realistic possibility. If it provided information helpful to the inquiry, it would be all to the good.

The first and foremost question is the consultation paper. I appreciate that it involves not only the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions but the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. There needs to be consultation between the two Departments, and I greatly appreciate the presence of the Minister responsible for fishing. We want progress. Every day that publication is delayed and action not taken is another day in which men risk their lives at sea because we are not learning the lessons of past tragedies. I urge the Minister to bring publication forward. She can be sure that I will respond positively and constructively, as will others, especially the families who have learnt from these tragedies. It would be helpful if the Minister could not only say when the paper will be published but give the timetable for the consultation and for turning the proposals into action.

What plans has the Department to assist voluntary efforts to establish ship-to-shore radio systems to allow regular reports on vessel location to avoid what happened with the Margaretha Maria? A FRAPS, or fishermen's reporting and positioning system, has been set up voluntarily at Newlyn by fishermen's wives after that tragedy. Its fund raising is voluntary and it is struggling

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to establish itself properly. Departmental support that did not put additional commercial pressure on vessels and respected confidentiality would be helpful.

What assessment has the Minister made of the need to require boat owners to insure the lives of crew as well as vessels? When will her Department publish the redraft of the code of practice for smaller fishing vessels under 12 m? What lessons have been learnt from the previous effort? My discussions with the inshore fleet around Cornwall revealed concern about the expense of inspection and monitoring. It would be helpful if the Department recognised that investment in assisting fishermen with safety features in their boats is money saved in searching for boats at sea later. It is investment well made.

Does the Minister agree that the informal, voluntary arrangements between her Department's agencies such as the MAIB and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency should be established as some formal duty shared by her Department and the Ministry of Defence? The lessons that we have learnt and the cases that I have described emphasise the need to clarify that. Does she agree that lives could be saved if MOD search and rescue helicopters and craft carried infra-red heat-seeking equipment? What assessment has the Department made of the stability of vessels carrying increasingly heavy gear on deck that makes many boats top-heavy? What lessons have been learnt about the failure of hydrostatic release units to operate automatically to provide crews with life rafts in so many recent fishing tragedies? What recommendation will she make on the difficult question of the recovery of bodies of men lost at sea? Where it is practical and does not risk other lives, the Government should reconsider their position.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): I am grateful to the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) for raising this important subject. Although the responsible Minister is on Government business abroad, I am responsible for health and safety. There are many cross-overs between health and safety on the shore and at sea.

By almost any measure, the industry has an unacceptable safety record. Over the past five years, the accident rate for UK fishing vessels has increased significantly. In 1997, there were about 60 accidents per 1,000 vessels, compared with about 45 in 1992, an increase of a third in only five years. Put another way, there is worsening safety with a falling number of vessels. As the number of vessels in the fleet falls, the safety record has worsened.

In terms of lives lost per 100,000 employees, the industry has a worse record than any other sector. In 1995–96, the rate of fatal injuries was 77 per 100,000 fishermen, compared with 23.2 per 100,000 employees in the mining and quarrying industry, which is the next worst category in that year. Last year, 29 fishermen lost their lives, as the hon. Member said. Five have lost their lives so far this year. In considering these sad and difficult issues, we send our condolences to those who have lost their loved ones.

The number of reported accidents to crew is increasing. We may suspect that many injuries go unreported. In the past, the industry was thought reluctant to spend money on safety. The Government's approach to regulating and enforcing safety, which I shall outline, seeks the active and positive co-operation of the industry. Fishing is a potentially hazardous occupation, but it is not good enough to accept that with a shrug of the shoulders. We are determined to reduce the accident rate, and I shall also mention what the industry is doing to help.

The regulations governing safety are enforced where appropriate by a survey and inspection regime, as the hon. Member for St. Ives knows. All UK-registered fishing vessels of 12 m and over in length must be surveyed every four years and issued with a UK fishing vessel safety certificate.

Fishing vessels under 12 m in length are not surveyed, but they must comply with relevant sections of the safety provisions rules that were introduced in 1975. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency carries out a large number of inspections of UK-registered fishing vessels each year—more than 6,000 in the past three years—with effort concentrated primarily on vessels of under 12 m.

Clearly, it is important to ensure better standards of safety for all fishing vessels, but the under-12 m sector remains a high priority as significantly more vessels—the vast majority—fall into this category. The MCA has been considering the safety of such vessels with the fishermen's federations, and I welcome the willingness that fishermen have shown in tackling this difficult and essential issue. Earlier discussions concluded that safety could best be improved by the introduction of a code of safe practice. The code would replace the 1975 safety provisions rules for smaller vessels and would ensure that each vessel was inspected regularly.

As the hon. Member for St Ives knows, a draft code, containing both mandatory requirements and recommendations based on good practice, was sent to all owners of UK-registered fishing vessels under 12 m in length last year. Many fishermen felt that the draft code was too complicated and were concerned about the potential costs. We have listened to their concerns and are now working with the industry to produce a revised code in order to deliver a genuine improvement in safety standards. In answer to one of the hon. Gentleman's questions, we hope to publish that code and the revised proposals in the autumn. I am confident that fishermen will want to take their own safety seriously, and that agreement on the code can be speedily reached. I hope that all vessel owners will realise that it is in their own interests to comply with the code when it is introduced. For larger vessels, we will implement the recently adopted European Union directive, which will establish a harmonised safety regime.

We have also recently implemented EU directives to improve occupational health and safety for workers at sea, including fishermen. Our legislation places a general duty of care on employers, which is new for fishing vessels, to protect the health and safety of workers through, for example, the provision of a safe working environment—including requirements for larger vessels relating to construction and equipment—safe working procedures, training, and instruction.

So far, I have spoken mainly about standards for vessel construction and the equipment carried on board, but it is just as important to ensure that fishermen are competent.

The industry's poor accident record indicates a clear need to ensure that fishermen receive appropriate basic safety training. At the moment, the requirement to undertake basic safety training applies only to new entrants to the industry and serving fishermen born on or after 1 March 1954. A recent review conducted by the marine accidents investigation branch indicated that emergencies were handled well by trained skippers and badly by those with no safety training—rather unsurprising, one might think. The review concluded that basic training covering sea survival, fire fighting and prevention, and first aid should be extended to all fishermen. The MCA is currently consulting the fishing industry on that issue.

Fishermen must be made aware that many accidents can be prevented by following safe procedures and practices. The MAIB publishes regular safety digests highlighting problem areas which it sends to agents, companies, owners, skippers, missions and the fishing press to help to inform fishermen and to prevent accidents.

Fatigue can lead to accidents in any industry and I suspect that it is an especially important factor in the accident statistics in the fishing industry, to which the hon. Gentleman referred and which I have already raised. It is clear that the problem of fatigue needs to be dealt with. The Government are considering controls on working time for fishermen in the context of the European Commission's proposals to extend the working time directive to the sectors, including sea fishing, that were originally excluded from it. Any legislation must, of course, be workable and take account of the operational requirements and the share fishermen system.

We cannot hope to improve safety standards in the fishing industry without first gaining the active co-operation of fishermen. The MCA chairs regular meetings of the fishing industry safety group, which is attended by representatives of the industry, other Government Departments and interested organisations. This group, which meets twice a year, allows constructive discussion and consultation on policy developments and implementation, and has produced important proposals such as the draft code of safe practice for vessels under 12 m.

While we want fishermen to take as much responsibility as possible for their own safety, the Government have a duty to provide an appropriate level of regulation and enforce it effectively. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency was formed on 1 April this year, by merging the Marine Safety Agency and the Coastguard Agency. Under the previous structure, the inspection of fishing vessels was the responsibility of the Marine Safety Agency. Its 15 dedicated fishing vessel surveyors, together with other marine surveyors deployed around the coastline, continue to inspect fishing vessels to ensure that they meet all appropriate safety standards.

However, following the merger, there is now also the scope to use the coastguard, which has 64 sector officers deployed around the coast, to reinforce the work of the inspectors. The benefits of this are significant. The coastguard has a major presence on the coast and its officers see fishing vessels far more regularly than do the traditional inspectors. A pilot scheme is taking place on the south coast this summer, which also involves coastguard officers in certain areas of this work.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the consultation paper on sea safety in the fishing industry would be published. I can tell him that it will almost certainly be published next week. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) is wandering around the Chamber. He has just come between the Minister and the hon. Member whom she is addressing. He must be more conscious of what is happening in the Chamber.

Angela Eagle: We hope to be able to address the responses to the consultation paper by the end of the year, but the hon. Member for St. Ives needs to bear in mind the fact that we do not yet know what the consultation will come up with. Some of the suggestions that arise out of it may require primary legislation or changes to particular regimes that will not have a definite timing, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will deal with the results of the consultation paper as quickly as we can.

Mr. Andrew George: Will the Minister expand on the extent to which the consultation paper will cover the issues that I have described in my speech?

Angela Eagle: I am trying to get through the long list of questions that the hon. Gentleman asked me in the time left to us. If I do not, I will write to him with my responses to the rest of his questions.

As for action to prevent accidents, clearly fishing is a dangerous occupation, and risk can never be eliminated. That is why the Government's consultation paper will seek comments from the fishing industry and from those involved in marine search and rescue on possible measures to improve survival rates following an accident. We shall be consulting on the maintenance and use of survival equipment, increased position reporting by fishing vessels, distress watch practices and the proper use and maintenance of key safety equipment. Maintenance is an important issue. As I said, we hope to be able to respond to the results of that consultation by the end of the year.

Some fishermen, sadly, will continue to be lost at sea and it is important that the Government keep under review their policy for locating and examining wrecks for accident investigation purposes, as well as their policy for the recovery of those lost at sea. The Government regard the sea as an honourable last resting place for those it has claimed. We believe that that is consistent with the traditions of seafaring, which recognise the sea bed as a grave. We recognise that modern technology makes possible the recovery of relatively small vessels, but such operations will often be dangerous and costly. Those issues are covered in our consultation paper. I very much hope that we can have a debate within that context.

The costs of a change in policy on the recovery of bodies would be considerable. If it is considered that the Government should fund the recovery of bodies from fishing vessels, arguably the cost should be reimbursed by the vessel's owner. The consequences could be a significant increase in insurance costs for vessel owners. The hon. Gentleman is clearly worried about this, as is the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond). The issues of cost, insurance costs and safety need to be considered carefully.

[Angela Eagle]

In summary, we acknowledge that commercial fishing is an inherently dangerous occupation. The continued high incidence of crew deaths and losses of fishing vessels means that efforts to raise safety standards and increase safety awareness within the industry must be improved. We must maintain an adequate rescue service—which we are doing. The hon. Member for St. Ives made a point about search helicopters. The reason why military helicopters do not carry the heat-seeking equipment that he talked about is that it allows them to be identified by potential enemies. However, they carry other equipment which achieves the same goal, but does not use the same technology. We cannot allow military helicopters to be pinpointed by those who may not have their best interests at heart. That does not alter the effectiveness of the search and rescue procedure.

We must ensure that appropriate safety standards are developed, with the industry's co-operation, and applied, either through widespread compliance with voluntary measures, or through the enforcement of Government regulation, where necessary. I look forward to receiving the industry's active co-operation and to the results of the consultation paper, which we hope to issue next week so that we can consign as far as possible debates such as this to history.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

City of Edinburgh (Guided Busways) Order Confirmation Bill

Mr. Secretary Dewar presented a Bill to confirm a Provisional Order under section 7 of the Private Legislation Procedure (Scotland) Act 1936, relating to City of Edinburgh (Guided Busways): And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be considered on Tuesday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 228].

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inward Investment

2. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): What discussions she has had concerning proposals for new inward investment into Northern Ireland. [49019]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Interest in investing in Northern Ireland remains strong, and the Industrial Development Board continues to identify and track opportunities for foreign investment and cultivate positive relationships with prospective investors. I met the US Secretary of Commerce, William Daley, during his recent visit to Northern Ireland. He was accompanied by senior executives of major US companies, all of whom expressed an interest in Northern Ireland as an excellent place in which to invest.

Mr. Evans: I asked for some figures from the Library, which indicate that, over the past 10 years, inward investment in Northern Ireland has been relatively low compared to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the Minister agree that the recently signed agreement has given fresh impetus to inward investment in Northern Ireland; but that the incidents of the past two weeks, including the tragic deaths of three young children, have set back that potential investment? What lessons have been learnt from the events of the past two weeks, so that such tragic incidents will not be repeated next year?

Mr. Ingram: First, I agree that the Good Friday agreement did give us a tremendous platform on which to build. I also agree that events in recent days and over the past two weeks have certainly damaged Northern Ireland internationally. I say to those who continue to campaign at Drumcree and to those who give them support, either by words or by deeds, that they are damaging the prospects for economic growth in Northern Ireland. I have received information today from a company with which I was in close contact and which was hoping to invest in Northern Ireland; it is now thinking of not doing so because of recent events. I hope that everyone in Northern Ireland—but, more important, those who are causing the mayhem and violence on the streets—hears that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Has it not always been the case that religious and political sectarianism in Northern Ireland undermines the possibility of getting the sort of inward investment that is so essential to Northern Ireland? Do not the terrible and tragic events of the past week, including the burning to death of three innocent young children, demonstrate, once again, where religious and political sectarianism is bound to lead? Such terrible crimes as the killing of three children should be a lesson to all those in Northern Ireland, that sectarianism should be undermined in every way and that both communities should be able to live together, as has been demonstrated by the Good Friday agreement and the election following the agreement.

Mr. Ingram: I agree entirely with those sentiments. To those who are trying to imply that the tragic death of those three young children was not sectarian based, but was somehow linked to other events not associated with Drumcree, I say that that is not the view of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Nor is it the view of the officer carrying out the investigation into those deaths, who has made it very clear that they were sectarian based. Let us hope that they are the last three deaths to occur because of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Everyone who is associated with Northern Ireland should take that message to those over whom they have influence.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): My colleagues and I join others in condemning recent acts of violence, including the murder of three young children at Ballymoney. Our hearts go out to the family of those children and our prayers are with them.

The Minister will be aware that there have been two recent bomb incidents in Northern Ireland and that the shadow of terrorism still casts itself over the economy of Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that until terrorism is removed from society in Northern Ireland and those who are still intent on the use of terrorism to advance their political agenda have been removed from the equation, the full potential of the economy cannot be developed?

Mr. Ingram: The one very clear answer to that question is that everyone—politicians and public alike—should get behind the Good Friday agreement. It was through that agreement that the people of Northern Ireland expressed what future they wanted for themselves, their children and their grandchildren. I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider that matter and now to get behind the agreement, as the majority of people have done.

Civic Forum

3. **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): When the Northern Ireland civic forum will be established. [49020]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has referred the establishment of the civic forum to the shadow assembly. In the period before devolution, the Government intend to consult the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the assembly so that arrangements can be put in hand to help secure its earliest appropriate establishment in parallel with progress made elsewhere.

Ms Moran: Among the death and destruction associated with Drumcree, is it not now more important than ever that support is given to those groups and individuals in civic society who seek to bring about accord, lasting prosperity and a positive view for the community's future? Does my hon. Friend agree that several of the Northern Ireland business community and women's groups working on the front line are to be commended for their work in that respect? Will he ensure

that they are fully supported and enabled to be involved in the civic forum to build a better future for Northern Ireland?

Mr. Murphy: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that the Churches, local business and commerce and the Northern Ireland trade unions will play a vital role in the civic forum. I pay tribute to the Church leaders, the Rev. Bingham, the leaders of business and commerce—Sir George Quigley of the Northern Ireland Economic Council and Mr. Chris Gibson of the Northern Ireland CBI—and the trade unions, all of whom have played a significant part in trying to reach a sensible accommodation over Drumcree. They truly reflect the wishes of the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland, who have twice voted for a peaceful and stable society.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): May I bring the Minister back to the question on the Order Paper? What is the Government's thinking about appointments to the civic forum? Will they be made by the United Kingdom Government, the assembly in Northern Ireland, the First Minister and his deputy or someone else?

Mr. Murphy: The agreement makes it clear that it is a matter for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to lay down guidelines for appointments to the civic forum. They will be put to the assembly for its consideration and approval. However, during the talks, people were very much in favour of involving the organisations to which I referred in my previous answer—the Churches, the voluntary sector, women's groups, business and trade unions. I am sure that they will play a very important role in the life of Northern Ireland and a consultative role for the assembly in the years ahead.

Peace Process

4. **Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): If she will make a statement about the development of the peace process. [49021]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): In considering an update on the development of the peace process, I am sure that the House will want to join me in offering support and condolences to the family of Richard, Mark and Jason Quinn.

Sadly, the violence continued at Drumcree last night and the police were caught up in that when blast bombs and missiles were thrown. I pay respect to the RUC for what they have done in the past week in very difficult circumstances. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are beginning to work to see what can be done to ensure that everything is in place for the assembly in September. Civil servants and others are working to make different options ready for the assembly in two months.

Mr. Canavan: I join my right hon. Friend in conveying the sympathies of the whole House to the family of Jason, Mark and Richard Quinn, who were so brutally murdered at the weekend. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any child's right to life is far more precious than any adult's right to march? Will she therefore appeal to all members of the Orange Order to listen carefully to the words of the Rev. William Bingham, the Orange Order chaplain for Armagh, who said that a walk down the Garvaghy road would be a very hollow victory because it would be in the shadow of the coffins of three little boys?

Marjorie Mowlam: No one across the whole of Northern Ireland does not agree with that sentiment in respect of the Quinn family and the difficulties that they face as a result of what has happened. However, we must look to the future. Whether it is this year, next year or the year after, unless we deal with the competing rights and the underlying sectarianism, we may face an equally difficult situation again. Whether it is the right to march, to live free from fear and intimidation or the very basic right to life, we can move forward only if people talk. It is only by finding a way together that we shall find a way through the current difficult situation.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): As has been said, we in the Ulster Unionist party are absolutely aghast at the terrible tragedy that occurred in Ballymoney and the deaths of the three Quinn children. We are also ashamed of the blatant sectarianism that we have witnessed in the past week in Northern Ireland. The greater number of people support the Stormont agreement, as it is properly called. However, I am astounded that, although this question refers to the peace process, the Secretary of State has failed totally to mention the main threat to peace in Northern Ireland. This has been lost sight of in light of the tragedies of the past week. A 1,400 lb bomb was intercepted on its way to Armagh city centre at the weekend, a 600 lb bomb was placed outside Newry courthouse at the weekend and the centre of the village of Newtown Hamilton has been smashed since the last Northern Ireland Question Time. The Government refuse to mention those republican terrorist attacks on Northern Ireland. Let us concentrate on the real threat to peace in Northern Ireland.

Marjorie Mowlam: Violence from whatever source is roundly condemned in the House. I fully acknowledge that many in the Orange Order at Drumcree do not want to see violence, but they are providing a front for others who are keen not just to cause violence but to destroy the Good Friday agreement. They are causing the problems. Whether it is at Drumcree or in the bombing and destruction of cities, people on the fringes and in fringe groups are indulging in that behaviour. We all condemn it, but, as my hon. Friends said earlier, we must see what we can do to build an alternative route for people to find a way forward.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): Would it not help the peace process if all political and religious leaders showed the sort of leadership that some have shown in the past few days? That would take the process forward and be a leap away from the sectarianism of the past. May we express the hope that, in future, three young children will not have to die in order that adults may learn the virtues of mutual respect and tolerance?

Marjorie Mowlam: I support the comments made by my hon. Friend. I should like to add that I believe that many leaders, across the spectrum of political parties in Northern Ireland, have shown leadership. They have shown a degree of determination and courage in a very, very difficult situation. I acknowledge that, and thank them for it.

Recalling the Good Friday agreement and the referendum, let us remember that the consent of the people of Northern Ireland is there to find an alternative way; I believe that life after Drumcree will be searching for that other way forward.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The Liberal Democrats share, with the whole House, the agony of the Quinn family following the very sad events of last Sunday. May we, however, urge the Secretary of State not to deflect from the path that she and the Government have taken in terms of the Belfast agreement? Despite its critics, that agreement is the way forward in terms of peace and hope for Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State make a statement today on the progress that has been made regarding strand 2 of the Belfast agreement and those conditions that need to be put in place by the end of October?

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. All aspects of the agreement—he refers especially to strand 2—are being worked on. Strand 2 refers to the North-South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies. The North-South Ministerial Council will be in place in the autumn; the implementation bodies by 31 October. The preparatory work for that is being done now. As I said, First Minister Trimble and Deputy First Minister Mallon will lead that work, in consultation with others, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that all aspects of the agreement are moving in parallel.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): On behalf of my party, I join the Secretary of State, and indeed the entire community of Northern Ireland, in expressing condolences to the Quinn family. It was an horrific, terrifying experience for them and for the entire community. Although there have been very many other instances of such sectarian terrorism, fortunately many did not result in tragic death. Does the Secretary of State agree that many civic and Church leaders, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister designate have set an example of the way in which the community in Northern Ireland can work together and can evolve toward a future?

Does the Secretary of State also agree that, in the circumstances that we have had in Northern Ireland—10 days of mayhem, disruption, intimidation, brutality—the answer is quite simple: that the intention to stage an illegal march down the Garvaghy road is the cause of this mayhem? Does she agree that a decision by the Orange Order not to carry out that illegal march would be not a defeat for it, but a massive contribution to the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland and, indeed, these islands?

Marjorie Mowlam: I agree with my hon. Friend's first point about acknowledging the work that the First and Deputy First Minister have done. It has been an incredible progress. I should like to acknowledge publicly that it has taken them both a lot of guts to do it, and I pay public tribute to them.

My hon. Friend spoke of the mayhem that has been going on for 10 days. People in Northern Ireland were shocked and stunned to a degree that was not experienced here. People here were shocked, but across the water it was amazing. As I said in answer to the previous question, there is still determination to ensure that the shadow North-South Ministerial Council is in place, and that the Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission and all the other bits of that agreement are still moving forward.

In relation to my hon. Friend's final point, what is important is that the Parades Commission's recommendations are followed. It has the law behind it. A parade went down the Lower Ormeau road in line with the Parades Commission recommendation, and the people on that road watched it go down in silence. There are lessons there to be learned by everyone.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Secretary of State agree that, in what has been a very bleak few weeks for the Province, when three innocent young children have been incinerated to death in what can only be described as a sectarian killing, an ethnic cleansing, there are two positive observations that the House can make? The first is that, yet again, the Royal Ulster Constabulary has held the line and ensured that the rule of law is upheld, at great personal cost to its members, and that, yet again, we owe the RUC a very great debt of gratitude. Secondly, the axis between First Minister Trimble and Deputy First Minister Mallon has held in the most difficult circumstances. That bodes extremely well for the future.

Marjorie Mowlam: I agree. I would add that a tribute is due not only to the RUC, but to the Army in support and to their families, many of whom faced intimidation and were driven out of their homes during this period.

Mr. MacKay: Will the Secretary of State look to the future, so that we may all learn the lessons of the past few weeks? Clearly, the civic forum will be important in Portadown, but can the right hon. Lady assure the House that the future of the Parades Commission will be examined? Everything must be open to further consideration, in light of what has happened.

Marjorie Mowlam: The civic forum is under discussion in our attempts to find an accommodation in Portadown and Drumcree.

The Parades Commission was set up by the previous Government and given legal authority by this Government. It is an independent body which makes decisions on almost impossible situations. We ought to acknowledge the public service rendered by the people who have served on it. It is not easy, and it is not a job which many people wanted. I thank them and their chair for what they have done.

When one is dealing with competing rights in Northern Ireland, there is no easy answer. What matters is that might is not right but the rule of law is right, and that is what the Parades Commission is upholding. I am sure that, at the end of the marching season, we will take stock, along with the commission, and see what lessons we can all learn for the future.

Economic Development

5. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): If she will make a statement on Government proposals to assist economic development in Northern Ireland. [49022]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): We will continue to assist Northern Ireland-based companies to grow through improved international competitiveness, thus expanding the local economy. In addition to the existing comprehensive range of support measures, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced an economic regeneration package aimed at promoting enterprise, encouraging investment and improving employment opportunities throughout Northern Ireland. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a further £1.4 billion package of measures, which will greatly assist the economic development of Northern Ireland

Mr. Browne: Can my hon. Friend give the House an estimate of the overall cost to the economy of Northern Ireland of the lawlessness at Drumcree and the related disturbance and violence across Northern Ireland over the past 10 days? Can he quantify the impact that that will have on the progress that has been made towards development and especially jobs in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Ingram: It is too early to say what the cost of the present Drumcree situation is. In 1995, the cost of events at Drumcree was nearly £1 million, in 1996 more than £2 million, and in 1997 £680,000. The cost of the policing of the Harryville demonstration was £2 million. The real cost, however, is not in money, but in human lives and misery. We now have a different way forward. I referred earlier to the economic packages that we are putting in place to create a new economic future for Northern Ireland. The Good Friday agreement provides the best framework for taking forward the social and economic development of the Province.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Yesterday's announcement by Chancellor Brown of future public spending will be welcomed in Northern Ireland, especially as new projects start and jobs are created. Does the Minister agree that when that money is in place, those who are unemployed must take the opportunity to participate as opportunities arise through the new deal? If they do that and match the commitment of employers in Northern Ireland, the Government's efforts to help our economy and to help people to help themselves will succeed.

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman could help me to do my job—trying to promote Northern Ireland's economy—by backing the Good Friday agreement.

Mr. Beggs *rose—*

Mr. Ingram: The more unity—*[Interruption.]* The more unity there is in Northern Ireland, the more we can leave the violence of the past 30 years behind us. That is what the Government have sought to do for the last year, by introducing a number of economic packages. I have campaigned in America, Japan and Taiwan to bring jobs to Northern Ireland; I now seek support, at all levels, for our attempts to give Northern Ireland peace, economic prosperity and a better future.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My hon. Friend mentioned bringing jobs to Northern Ireland from America. Has he recently received a communication from Mr. Hevesi, the New York city comptroller? As my hon. Friend will know, Mr Hevesi is in charge of the New York city employees' pension fund, which I think now stands at about $60 billion. I am given to understand that he and his colleagues are interested in investment in Northern Ireland, especially following the Good Friday agreement.

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received a letter to that effect. I met Mr. Hevesi when I was last in New York, and we began to discuss some of the possibilities for economic prosperity offered by the investment trust. It is clear that the people of New York feel good will in regard to the Good Friday agreement, and I hope that we can build on that in the months and years ahead.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Is the Minister aware that the aforesaid gentleman—the comptroller of New York city—has been waving his promises, and his wallet, at Northern Ireland for many years without ever putting his money where his mouth is?

Mr. Ingram: It is just as well that the hon. and learned Gentleman is not trying to attract inward investment. While we have been trying to build a better economic framework in Northern Ireland, others have been trying to destroy the very base on which we are attempting to create economic prosperity.

Political Institutions (Women)

6. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): If she will make a statement on the involvement of women in political institutions in Northern Ireland; and what plans she has to encourage greater involvement of women. [49023]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): The role of women in Northern Ireland is very important, and has been for many years. In terms of political representation, however, we still have a good deal of progress to make. There are only 14 women in the assembly, which has 108 members—although 50 women stood—and only 85 district councillors in Northern Ireland are female.

As my hon. Friend knows, it is ultimately up to the parties in Northern Ireland to put women forward, but I assure her that we have done everything possible to give both women and men in Northern Ireland a chance to make choices and secure opportunities that would not otherwise have been available. The establishment of equal rights, the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, the incorporation of the European convention on human rights, the introduction of the minimum wage and changes in benefit will give women more choices.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that women such as Chrissie Quinn have often borne the brunt of the failure of political parties in Northern Ireland to reach a settlement? Does she agree that it is the women who have been able to demonstrate practical and, often, non-sectarian organisational solutions to community

problems? What steps will she take to ensure that the proposed Northern Ireland civic forum involves more female participants than the assembly unfortunately does?

Marjorie Mowlam: One ability that women have, which is a great help in negotiations, is the ability to listen. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. That is a very good instruction to the House. May I have a little order? I can hear conversations taking place. I can hear everything that is being said in the back row of the Opposition Benches.

Marjorie Mowlam: I share my hon. Friend's feelings about Chrissie Quinn and the pain and suffering that she is going through, as many other women have done. Women have played an important role in Northern Ireland, particularly in the community sector. I hope that the civic forum will provide another option for them. We shall put forward a number of mechanisms to the politicians of Northern Ireland for the future. I hope that women's voices are heard. Some 75 per cent. of women across Northern Ireland supported the Good Friday agreement in the referendum.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Are you not sitting in that Chair because of your ability, Madam Speaker, and is the right hon. Lady not sitting on the Front Bench because of her ability and charm? It has everything to do with equal opportunities and nothing to do with politically correct claptrap.

Marjorie Mowlam: I do not think that it is a question of charm for either of us. Like all the women in this House, women who hold positions in Northern Ireland have come through a system of political parties. It is important that women and men have opportunities and choices in their lives. That is why I mentioned the minimum wage and the European convention on human rights. Those measures will give women and men who do not have employment a chance to gain the respect and confidence to do what they want with their lives.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [49048] **Mr. Phil Woolas** (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 July.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had the pleasure, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, to visit Hawley infants and nursery school in Camden, which, along with schools throughout the country, will benefit from the reforms and spending announced yesterday. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have meetings with ministerial colleagues later in the day.

Mr. Woolas: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the £19 billion extra for education and the £21 billion extra for health are much more than the previous Government were prepared to spend and significantly more than the infinitely elastic 1p on income tax from the Liberal Democrats? Is he aware that my constituents want the extra money to be translated into real hospital beds and real classrooms as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. That is precisely what will happen. The spending increases announced yesterday—the £19 billion for education and the £21 billion for health—will ensure that we have the public services that we need. By tying the money to reform and modernisation, we shall ensure that it is spent well and wisely and goes to the front line of services. The shadow Chancellor decided to oppose our plans. The Conservatives will go into the next general election saying that, whereas we are providing more for schools and hospitals, they would provide less. That is their choice and they will live with it.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Does the Prime Minister recognise that having vowed to cut welfare bills, he has comprehensively failed to do so? Will he confirm that the social security budget will rise by more than £27 billion over the next three years? Will he explain why he did not talk about that in answer to the previous question and why the Chancellor did not even mention it yesterday?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to talk about that. The £27 billion that the right hon. Gentleman refers to will be spent on the whole social security budget. The vast bulk of it will be spent on pensions, child benefit and disabilities. Through the new deal, we are cutting spending on social and economic failure, as we promised. Perhaps he will tell us which of those items—pensions, child benefit or disabilities—he would like to cut.

Mr. Hague: It is the Prime Minister who said:

"New Labour is about cutting welfare bills".

It is no good two years later asking other people how to do it. When he said that, people thought that he knew how to do it. The rate of growth of welfare spending will increase—£5 billion next year, £8 billion the year after and £14 billion the year after that. Those are the Chancellor's figures. Will the Prime Minister now admit that he has failed and that far and away the biggest increase in yesterday's announcement—bigger than education, bigger than health—was in welfare and social security spending?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that we quite had an answer to that point on pensions, did we?

I should point out that the social security budget is rising less under this Government than it did under the right hon. Gentleman's. More than that, we promised that we would cut the bills of economic and social welfare. That is what the new deal does. That is why young people are getting jobs that they did not get under the Tories. That is the why the long-term unemployed are off benefit and into work, which did not happen under the Tories. That is why, for the first time in years, the number of lone parents on income support has fallen below 1 million, and is due to fall by another 40,000 next year. All those things reduce the bills of failure. That is our policy—opposed by

the right hon. Gentleman. He opposes not merely raising pensions, child benefit and disability payments, but measures that cut the bills of economic and social failure.

Mr. Hague: If the Prime Minister is doing so well at cutting those bills, why are they going up faster than any other Government bills? Will he confirm that the £27 billion increase in the social security budget does not even include the working families tax credit—contrary to the impression that he has been giving in radio interviews this morning—and that, when that and all other social security expenditure under different headings are added together, the total rise in welfare spending in the next three years will be more than £37 billion, which is almost as much as the increases in education and health spending put together? Is he proud of producing that?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is on a listening tour, so let him listen. As I have just told him, the vast bulk of the rise in social security spending is on pensions, child benefit and disability payments. Which of those does he oppose? *[Interruption.]* Let us have some silence; let us ask which. We do not have an answer. He is just like his shadow Chancellor, who is touring television studios saying that he is against all the spending that we announced yesterday, but every time that he is asked about a specific, such as education or health, he says that he is in favour of it. The Leader of the Opposition does not know where he stands on spending or social security. He is all right dancing around the Dispatch Box with sixth form debating society phrases about lobbyists, but when it comes to the hard business of politics and government, he does not have a clue.

Mr. Hague: We always know that, when the Prime Minister gets on to the sixth form debating society, he does not know how to answer the question. Why can we not have a specific answer from the man who is meant to give specific answers, who said:

"New Labour is about cutting welfare bills".

and now presides over an enormous increase in welfare bills? If he is so proud of those spending figures, why is the Chancellor trying to hide so many of them? Why do all the figures for the working families tax credit appear in the Chancellor's document under "accounting adjustments"? Why do we have a £14 billion increase in "accounting adjustments"—the fourth largest increase of any Government programme? No doubt the Paymaster General would have put it down as "directors' fees".

This year's failure on welfare is being paid for by last year's tax increases—by home owners, pension fund holders, car owners and businesses. This is from the Government who said that there would be no tax increases at all. Were not people deceived at the election, just like those who thought that the Prime Minister was serious about welfare reform?

The Prime Minister: Let me try to explain it to the right hon. Gentleman again. At the election, we said that we would cut the bills of social and economic failure. That is what the new deal does. The right hon. Gentleman opposes the new deal. The rest of the increases in welfare spending are on pensions, child benefit and disabilities—all spending of which he now says he is in favour. Welfare spending under this Government is rising less in real terms than it did under his Government, precisely because we are cutting the bills of failure, as we promised. The truth is that he does not know where he stands on that, as he does not know where he stands on every other serious spending issue.

Mr. Hague: The truth is that the Prime Minister does not know the figures. According to the figures released by the Library this morning, the rise in welfare spending for the two years' spending that the Government inherited from us is 0 per cent., whereas the average rise for the three years that they have just planned for will be 3.5 per cent. a year in real terms. How can the Government say that their policies succeed in reducing welfare bills? That is what the Prime Minister promised to do before the election, and that is what he is failing to do. He said that it was all about tough choices, and he has failed to make those choices. He said it was about cutting the bills, and the bills are going up. He talked about open government, and he has finished up with £14 billion of "accounting adjustments". When will he do as he promised and come forward with welfare reform that actually reduces the welfare bill?

The Prime Minister: The welfare reform that reduces the welfare bills is tackling social and economic failure. That is why we are committed to the new deal, which is opposed by the right hon. Gentleman's party. That is why we are committed to the working families tax credit, which is opposed by his party. That is why we are investing money in education, which is opposed by his party. That is why we are investing money in inner cities, which is also opposed by his party. We are investing the money for the long-term health of the country, cutting the deficit that we inherited from his party, and cutting the welfare bills for social and economic failure. Our record on fiscal prudence, spending, investment and growth is better than anything that his lot ever achieved.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, on the radio this morning, the shadow Chancellor talked about a 20 per cent. increase in spending, but then went on to say that, for every £4 spent now, £5 would be spent in future? By my reckoning, that is not a 20 per cent. increase. Does that not tell him a lot about the quality of the Opposition—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman, and all Members, must ask the Prime Minister questions about things for which he has a responsibility—nothing to do with the Opposition. I have told the House on more than one occasion that questions should be framed about responsibilities that the Prime Minister carries. Can the hon. Gentleman try better?

Mr. Levitt: Does what the shadow Chancellor said not show the need for radical investment in education for numeracy, as we have proposed?

The Prime Minister: We do have an excellent adult numeracy programme. When the shadow Chancellor was on the radio this morning, he was also asked, "Mr. Maude, can you really have it both ways—asking for increased spending but opposing overall increased spending?" and he said, "Oh, of course we can." The truth of the matter is that the Opposition really do not know where they stand—but they cannot have it both ways. Yesterday,

they decided that they opposed the spending that we have put forward, so they will go into the next election opposing all the good things that we are doing for schools and hospitals.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I am delighted that, yesterday, the Government finally opened the war chest that they have been telling us for the past year did not exist. I am even more delighted that they have decided to do as we have been telling them for the past year, and use the money for schools and hospitals. However, will the Prime Minister now confirm that that three-year spending on health and education will be both inflation proofed and recession proofed?

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that we are never knowingly underspent by the Liberal Democrats. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the figures, the forecasts for growth and the economic forecasts, he will see that they are extremely careful and cautious, and have been agreed—as the Conservatives' never were—by the National Audit Office. As for inflation, the right hon. Gentleman knows about yesterday's figures. The real-terms increases we are putting into health and education over the next few years will make a significant difference to schools and hospitals. The important thing is that that is done after two years in which we tightened our belt; we had to do so to make sure that any extra investment in public services was sustainable over the long term.

Mr. Ashdown: I am sorry that the Prime Minister chose not to answer the question, because it is really a very simple one. We want to know what happens if the unexpected happens. We want to know the strength of the Prime Minister's will to deliver. The question is very simple. If inflation is greater than forecast, will the Chancellor find the extra money? If growth is less than forecast, will the Chancellor find the extra taxes?

The Prime Minister: We put forward our proposals based on the evidence we have and on our predictions, which we believe to be correct. They are cautious, and are not anything other than entirely in line with what is expected. Compared with other independent forecasts, they are positively cautious. However, it is precisely for that reason that we have built in current account surpluses for every one of the three years—some £30 billion-worth. All those things are important in making sure that we are able to meet our pledges, irrespective of the economic circumstances. We believe that those economic circumstances will be as we have set out.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Does the Prime Minister agree that, in spite of the terrible events in Northern Ireland in the past few days, the words of Father Forde, the local priest, at the service for the three young boys yesterday—that the shared sorrow was a "beacon of hope" for the future—reflect the decent voice of decent people in Northern Ireland? Does he further agree that we should send our congratulations to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, who have shown that they can be even-handed, and that those people who call for their disbandment are just plain wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend, and I should like to pay tribute to her for the work that she has done over a long period in Northern Ireland. It seems strange to say so in light of the appalling and evil tragedy of the murder of those three children, but the fact is that we will overcome those latest difficulties. The people have voted for peace in Northern Ireland in the referendum and in the Assembly elections. The overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland want the peace process to continue. They do not share the views of the extremists, and they have shown their will over the past few days that those extremists ought not to be able to set the agenda. In showing that they are prepared to stand up for the rule of law in respect of intimidation from any quarter, the RUC did a great service to themselves and to the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Q2. [49049] **Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley): The Prime Minister will probably agree that, over the past 20 years, there have been great improvements in London and the south-east. In spite of that, there are still areas of great need. For example, 19 of the 22 most needy boroughs in the country are in London. At the moment, the education authorities in London and the south-east are looking at their indicative standard spending assessments for next year. Surrey will lose £8 million, and London will lose £227 million. Can the Prime Minister explain to me and to the children of London and the south-east why that is, and if the same unfair form of allocation will continue for the funds announced yesterday?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is, in effect, asking for extra investment in education—that is exactly what we are doing, opposed by his party. The investment will be made on a fair basis. He talks about need having grown over the past 20 years, and it has. That is why we are creating the new deal, the action on social exclusion and the investment into the inner cities which need it most. When we get that extra money into education, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support this side of the House against his own leadership.

Q3. [49050] **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What further plans does my right hon. Friend have to put a strong emphasis on the attack on social exclusion through his unit at No. 10 and to promote cross-departmental co-operation? In the light of the extra £4.4 billion for regeneration that was announced yesterday in the comprehensive spending review, will he urge members of the unit to visit seaside towns, such as Blackpool, which have particular problems and where a co-ordinated approach to multiple deprivation is necessary?

The Prime Minister: Of course the social exclusion unit has produced two excellent reports—one on truancy, the other on rough sleepers—which have been very well received over the past few months. My hon. Friend is right to say that the additional money—the £3.6 billion of capital receipts that will help in respect of housing and the £800 million that is part of the new deal money for communities—will tackle the problems of social exclusion and deprivation. We believe that, if that investment goes into our economy, we can give opportunities to people who do not currently have them, so that they can come off benefit, get into work and make

a contribution to society. That is better for them and for the economy, and it will create the fairer, more decent society that Labour Members want.

Q4. [49051] **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): Yesterday, when the Prime Minister did his U-turn on social security spending—instead of cutting it, he increased it by £27 billion—was he not returning to the bad old Labour ways of spend, spend, spend the people's money? When the Chancellor's gamble goes wrong, as it surely will, will that not mean, once again, tax, tax, tax the people?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman did not listen to a word of what I was saying—*[Interruption.]* I answered the question very clearly indeed. First, if the hon. Gentleman is accusing us of raising social security spending too much, that is rather curious, as we are increasing it far less than the Conservative Government did. Secondly, the vast bulk of the £27 billion, as I have said, is going on pensions, child benefit and disability benefits. *[Interruption.]* Which of those does the hon. Gentleman oppose? He can shout it out now, but he does not know. The Conservatives are the great don't knows. After the most important spending proposals that this country has seen for decades, they are paralysed, unable to decide whether to pander to their right wing or to get behind us and support the policies that the country wants.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I am sure that, given his personal involvement in trying to find a resolution, the Prime Minister is acutely aware of the tragedy that has taken place in Northern Ireland over the past 10 days. Does he agree that the right of a limited number of people to march on a limited stretch of road must be subjugated to the odds of death, terrorism, sectarianism, intimidation, road blocking and the destruction of business, which is what we are now seeing? Will he continue his efforts—which are greatly appreciated by the entire community in Northern Ireland—in the proximity arrangements between the contending parties? Pray God, those efforts will come to fruition, so that we in Northern Ireland can return to some sort of normality.

The Prime Minister: Of course there is never any excuse for violence and intimidation from any quarter. The difficulty with marches is that there are competing rights. People want to march in traditional ways, but other people who live in areas where they feel that the march is provocative do not want it to happen. My judgment—I think that it is the judgment of the majority of people in Northern Ireland—is that, with a bit of good will and dialogue, we could find a way around the problem, so that people can enjoy their right to march peacefully and unprovocatively and the dignity of local residents can be respected.

I regard what is happening as one of a series of hurdles that we need to get over to secure peace in Northern Ireland. We got over the referendum and the assembly elections and we must now get through the marching season to create the climate and atmosphere in which people can see that their differences can be easily resolved with good will and dialogue. We shall do all that we can, and I thank the hon. Gentleman and the leadership of his party for the incredibly responsible way in which they have behaved over the past few days. I congratulate the First Minister, the leader of the Ulster Unionists, and his deputy, who, as two people, have shown exactly what the future of Northern Ireland could be if people wanted it.

Q5. [49052] **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): Why does the Prime Minister continue to deny that he made the pledge that he would cap the taxpayer's burden, which is social security spending? Did he not make that pledge before the general election because he knew that, if he did not cut spending, the economy and all the plans that were outlined yesterday would be jeopardised? Where will the money come from?

The Prime Minister: Let me read our commitment to the hon. Gentleman. We said:

"we will increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure."

That is what the new deal is about. I did not promise to cut pensions, disability living allowance or child benefit, which are also part of the welfare and social security budget. If the hon. Gentleman is in listening mode, I will explain. Part of the budget is spending on pensions, child benefit and people with disabilities: good, we like that. The other part is spending on unemployment and people on benefit when they should be at work: bad, we want to decrease that. This part we protect, and that part we use the new deal to diminish—got it?

Q6. [49053] **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that many single people living alone feel that they get a raw deal from the way in which water charges are currently made. The Government's review on the future of water charges is making rapid progress, and I hope that it will decide that compulsory water meters are not the solution for most of the country. Does he agree that we should ensure that single people living alone get a fairer deal, perhaps by giving them a discount similar to those applied to council tax?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, we are considering the responses to the consultation. When it is right to do so, we will state our decisions. I have no doubt that we will bear my hon. Friend's point in mind when we take the decisions.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The Prime Minister said that the spending review would enable more to go to front-line services. What about front-line soldiers? The Chancellor's statement has taken a major bite out the defence budget, worth nearly £1 billion. How much of that mouthful of money will be added back to the defence budget to enable the Secretary of State for Defence to meet his obligation and pledge to improve service people's pay and conditions of service, to fill the gap of 5,000 soldiers in the Army, to attract in the 3,300 more soldiers whom he has said that he intends to hire, and to retain those who are already serving in the armed forces?

The Prime Minister: I know that the hon. Gentleman has a long history of interest in these matters, but I am not taking any lessons from Conservatives on defence spending, because they cut it by 30 per cent. and cut the Territorial Army by 30 per cent. It is interesting that, the moment a Conservative Member of Parliament gets off message, he asks for more spending, not less.

The strategic defence review was an extraordinary exercise, undertaken with and supported by all the armed services. It does not in any way reduce our capability, but modernises it and makes it right for the 21st century. That is why it has been so widely welcomed.

Q7. [49054] **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the recent report by the Royal College of Radiologists, which shows clearly that radiotherapy is a cost-effective treatment for the management and cure of cancers. He will also be aware that the treatment cannot be equally accessed throughout the country, which leads to waiting time and waiting list increases. Will he campaign with me for the purchase of equipment, such as linear accelerators and for trained staff to rectify that anomaly?

The Prime Minister: The report sets out the model for high-quality cancer services. We have already made additional resources available for such services, but the £21 billion additional spending for the national health service that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced yesterday will improve services. It is important that that money goes to front-line services, cancer services included, and the health service White Paper guarantees that everyone with suspected cancer will be able to see a specialist within two weeks of their general practitioner deciding that they need to be seen urgently and requesting an appointment. That system will be in place in April 1999 for breast cancer and by April 2000 for all other cancers. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and we have committed those additional funds to get the right type of equipment and processes into the national health service. As the money feeds through, I hope that people will see substantial improvements in the quality of their services.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Manufacturing is already in recession. Should the rest of the economy slow down, how will yesterday's spending commitments be paid for?

The Prime Minister: As I explained a moment or two ago, our forecasts are very cautious and we will be running current account surpluses, as opposed to the deficits that were run under the Conservative Government. It is true that manufacturing output has been more or less static in the past year and has slightly declined in the past two quarters, but no one in manufacturing should be in any doubt about what the consequences of Conservative economic policy would be. We saw those consequences at the end of the late 1980s and we will remind the country of what they were: 15 per cent. interest rates; manufacturing output down 7 per cent.; and the deepest recession in the country's history. That was Conservative economic policy and we are not going back to it.

Education Expenditure

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the impact of the comprehensive spending review on education and employment.

Yesterday's announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer heralds a new beginning for our schools, colleges and universities. This is a new contract for education—an investment on an unprecedented scale to deliver a step change in education standards nationwide. Every pound of new funding has been linked to demanding targets, including firm targets for mathematics and English, to drive up standards across the board. That settlement demonstrates the Government's commitment to fulfilling our pledges—investing in the future of our children and the employability and lifelong learning of our people. It allows us to modernise and renew our commitment to taking on the challenge of a new century.

In the years ahead, we intend to create the classroom of the future. Smaller classes and the expansion of modern technology to support learning will be matched by better motivated and more highly skilled teachers. The best will be rewarded, building on the new grade of advanced skill teacher, and we shall seek to recruit, retain and reward our teachers to match the task ahead.

The settlement will allow us to employ more classroom assistants to back up our teachers. We intend to improve dramatically the adult:pupil ratio in primary classrooms, to ensure that children have the attention that they need to succeed.

Since May last year, we have announced an extra £2.5 billion for education and £3.5 billion for the new deal programme for unemployed men and women. We are building on the progress made this year. From September, there will be lower class sizes for 100,000 pupils in infant classes throughout the country, a new literacy framework and an early years place for every four-year-old whose parents wish it.

We have made a good beginning, but I can inform the House that we shall do even better in the next three years. A flying start in life is crucial to success. That is why I am announcing a new initiative to link support for families and nursery education in providing a sure start for all our children. "Sure Start" will be a cross-Department initiative. Colleagues in the Department of Health and others will work with the Department for Education and Employment to provide comprehensive support for pre-school children who face the greatest disadvantage. It will include child care and play, primary health care, early education and family support. We are spending £540 million on "Sure Start" over three years, in addition to spending on our child care initiative.

Nursery education is the foundation of later educational success. I am pleased to announce that there will be an extra 190,000 nursery places for three-year-olds in England by 2002. That will double to two thirds the number of three-year-olds who have access to a free nursery place, and it is the first step towards ensuring universal provision for all three-year-olds whose parents want it.

We promised the voters that by 2002, no five, six or seven-year-old would be in classes of more than 30. That essential pledge is a key component in raising standards, and I am keen to make even faster progress. I am pleased to tell the House that the money announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor yesterday will enable us to achieve that pledge earlier. No five, six or seven-year-old will be in a class of more than 30 by September 2001. I can go still further. The resources available will enable local education authorities that wish to do so to fulfil that aim by September 2000—18 months earlier than we promised the electorate.

An extra £160 million will be available to adapt or build 2,000 extra classrooms, ensuring that we can underpin parental preference as well as deliver smaller class sizes. An extra 6,000 teachers will be employed to ensure that youngsters learn the basics. In total, we shall spend an additional £620 million between now and 2002, to deliver our pledge.

Not only our schools will gain; our universities and colleges will be winners. We have taken tough but fair decisions on funding for further and higher education. We did so to end the years of neglect that brought a 30 per cent. drop in funding for each higher education student over the last seven Conservative Budgets. We shall carry through our promise to spend the money raised by our new student support arrangements on improving access to, and investment in, further and higher education. In 1999–2000 alone, there will be an extra £280 million for our universities, which is a 5.7 per cent. cash increase for higher education and includes £50 million for research. That will be in addition to the substantial sums announced by my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade for research and science expenditure.

I am particularly pleased to announce an additional £255 million for our further education and sixth-form colleges, which is a cash increase for next year alone of 8.2 per cent. That will enable us to improve skill levels, and to increase rates for staying on at age 16. The real-terms increase in spending on education across the United Kingdom over the next three years will be almost 16 per cent.—an average of more than 5 per cent. a year. In cash terms, that is an increase of 25 per cent.

Our school system was failed by the Conservative party. During the 18 years that it was in power, it managed an average real-terms increase of only 1.4 per cent. a year. In the three years to 1997, it reduced the amount that it allocated in real terms to education year on year. Inevitably, class sizes rose year on year. Today marks the end of that sorry decline.

By contrast, we shall have allocated almost £10 billion by 2001. We shall double spending on capital investment over the Parliament: money for repair and modernisation and for classrooms fit to learn in. The sorry—the Tory Government—*[Laughter.]* The sorry Tory Government, in their final death throes, cut spending by £110 per pupil. Our spending proposals mean an increase of £300 per pupil next year over and above what the Conservatives would have spent had they won the last general election. In the months and years ahead, the change will be clear for all to see in the fabric of our schools, in the professionalism and morale of our teachers and in the results achieved by our pupils.

This is an historic day for education. It is the largest and best settlement in any three-year period since the war. It will give every pupil and every teacher, every parent

and every governor, the confidence that they need to deliver the high standards essential for all our needs and for a new millennium. We said that we would make education our top priority and that we would spend more of our national income than our predecessors on education. Today, we are fulfilling our promises. Tomorrow, we shall start to deliver the education service that Britain deserves.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his boldness and ingenuity in constructing very large figures for future spending, by counting absolutely everything together on top of the cash figures for this year—future inflation, three years' worth of raids on the contingency reserve, statistical changes all thrown together in one great hotch-potch. Will he confirm that using exactly his methodology, starting from one year's cash figures and counting everything else as an increase, the Conservative Government presided over increases in education spending that cumulatively totalled £250 billion since 1979? They totalled £26 billion since 1992.

Will the Secretary of State also confirm that, despite his pledge to increase the proportion of our national output that goes on education, it will take him four years to get back to the position that he inherited from us? He is running hard to stand still. In our last year of office, we devoted 4.9 per cent. of gross domestic product to education, although I notice that he has cut his estimate of that to 4.7 per cent. We understand that he wants to fiddle his own figures, but will he kindly stop fiddling ours?

The Secretary of State makes much play of getting to 5 per cent. of GDP in his fifth year of office, but the average over the lifetime of this Parliament will be 4.8 per cent. of GDP spent on education. The average during the five years of the previous Parliament was 5.1 per cent. We are talking not about unprecedented investment but about unprecedented hype.

The Secretary of State offered us a familiar list of the areas on which the money will be spent. He repeated yet again his pledge on class sizes. Was not it supposed to be an early pledge? Now we are talking about 2001. What does "early" mean in the lexicon of new Labour—2002? Does he accept that today's statement is the final admission that he cannot finance his class size pledge by the abolition of the assisted places scheme? His problem is that large classes are often in the popular schools that get good Office for Standards in Education reports and to which parents want to send their children. Many such schools simply do not have the physical space to embark on large-scale building programmes. Will not his rigid commitment to his policy mean a reduction in parental choice? Why has he failed yet again to promise that he will not achieve his class size target at the expense of parental choice?

The Secretary of State talked about expanding provision in the early years, but is he aware that many independent and voluntary nurseries for four-year-olds up and down the country are closing as a result of his so-called expansion of education for four-year-olds, which meant public sector expansion at the expense of everyone else? Is not that just what he intends to do for very young children as well? Can he assure the 80,000 providers—

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) *rose—*

Mr. Willetts: I am asking the Secretary of State for an assurance on behalf of the 80,000 providers of 800,000 places for children aged up to four that they will not lose out to state provision in the same way as charitable and private providers of education for four-year-olds are already doing.

The Secretary of State was ingenious in his spinning before the statement today. We had in yesterday's edition of *The Guardian* the headline that I presume was meant for the teachers, "Extra funds for teachers and nurses". Then there was the headline in *The Daily Telegraph*, "Public sector workers face pay squeeze". Which headline was true? What are his intentions with regard to teachers' pay? He has been specific today about capital, but we have heard nothing but vague statements about pay. It is no good having shiny new classrooms if one cannot retain and recruit good teachers to teach in them. It is no good pandering to the Chancellor's obsession with physical construction and capital if one does so at the expense of the recruitment of good teachers.

How much of the extra money will reach the schools? We know from last year when the Secretary of State boasted of an extra increase in education expenditure of £800 million that only £500 million got through to the schools. The Secretary of State is loading more and more tasks on local education authorities and at the same time urging them to pass more money on to schools. How does he intend to ensure that that happens?

We have heard about more money for higher education. The Secretary of State spoke about £280 million going to universities in 1999–2000, but in that very same year students will lose grant worth £600 million and will face tuition fees of £250 million. The sum of £850 million taken from students is not matched by £280 million going into higher education.

We have the pledge of 500,000 more places in higher education and further education. There is no indication of where the places will be or how many will be in higher education. Will the Secretary of State confirm that many of the new places will be part time and that the full-time equivalents will be less than half of the 500,000 that he is talking about?

Everyone involved in education will of course welcome the increase in expenditure, as I do, but they will not welcome the Secretary of State's desire to interfere in every nook and cranny of what goes on in the schools, colleges and universities of our country. That is no way to raise education standards.

Mr. Blunkett: If I could glean the question, I would be well on the way to giving the answer. The truth is that the House will have realised that someone described as "two brains" must have lost one brain on the way here this afternoon—so much so that someone on the hon. Gentleman's own side tried to intervene on him even though he was asking a question.

I am not clear whether the hon. Gentleman is in favour of more spending on education or against it. The shadow Chancellor is against it; the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment appears to want more spending. He wants to accumulate the measly spending over 18 years and pretend that it matches ours over three

[Mr. Blunkett]

years—1.4 per cent. real-terms growth over 18 years, which is matched by 16 per cent. real-terms growth in just three years. Everyone outside the House will be able to make a judgment of his own.

I did glean one question. It was about the GDP proportion, which works like this: under cash accounting, it is 4.7 per cent. rising to 5.1 per cent.; under resource accounting, which the Treasury now uses, it is 4.6 per cent. rising to 5 per cent. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman to work out the difference. Of course, the increase in GDP by 1992 was achieved on the back of one of the worst slumps that this country has had since the second world war. Anyone who knows anything about economics knows that the ratio of GDP goes up as, regrettably, growth slows and goes down.

Let me answer some of the questions that I gleaned in respect of what is described as an early pledge. An early pledge is 2000 rather than 2002. An early pledge for five, six and seven-year-olds is a pledge that we made but which the Conservative party never intended to make and would never have made, even as class sizes rose year on year. Of course there will be choice: I made it clear in my statement that parental preference will be taken into account, and that is why we are investing additional cash.

The most breathtaking point posed was the issue of teachers' pay. Who was it who got into a terrible mess over pensions, which accelerated the drain away from the teaching profession? Who was it who drove teachers by the thousand out of a profession of which they should be proud? Let me make it clear again this afternoon: we wish to recruit, we wish to retain, we wish to reward and we wish to motivate. We shall do so by working out with the profession a way in which we can ensure that performance is applauded, that cash is available for those who need it, that we can retain good teachers in the profession and that we can have the sort of standards that were never possible under the Conservative party.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): May I warmly welcome today's statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and congratulate him on having secured such a high proportion of the additional resources for expenditure? Will he tell the House what steps he is taking to ensure that the money for schools actually goes through to the institutions themselves?

Mr. Blunkett: That is a crucial question, in view of the experience over the past year and the indications that there are authorities that are saying that they are not prepared to go along with the priorities laid down by the Government. One of the ways in which I should like to achieve what my hon. Friend asks is by asking the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) and representatives of the Liberal Democrats to join me in writing to every leader of every council and every chair of education saying that, now that the resources have been found and the money has been allocated, they will back me in ensuring that their councillors as well as mine carry that money into every school and every classroom in the country.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Unlike the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), who seems completely blind to a good deal for education, may I genuinely congratulate the Secretary of State and applaud his statement today? Does he find it somewhat odd that the hon. Member for Havant cannot find a single thing in the statement to welcome? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman finds it difficult to welcome the significant improvement in early years education, given the mess that the Conservatives made with nursery vouchers, but he could at least have welcomed "Sure Start", as I do.

In view of the answer that the Secretary of State gave to the hon. Gentleman, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, if we are to have the high-quality education that both he and I want, we shall have to have a sufficient number of high-quality teachers, so we shall have to improve the pay and conditions package for the vast majority of teachers and not only for the few super teachers? Does he also accept that there is a need to further his attempt to reduce bureaucracy for teachers, by increasing the number of ancillary assistants in schools? Can he confirm that that is included in the package?

Mr. Blunkett: On the last point, I am happy to confirm that the programme that we are laying out will include teachers' assistants, ancillary and non-teaching staff in the team that makes up the delivery of the education service. Our bureaucracy working party, which has now been welcomed by all the teachers' unions and is already working, will make a difference.

Of course it is necessary to pay teachers well. We have to balance the inflationary pressures that are evident in today's statistics relating to the private sector with the need to reward teachers well and keep them in the classroom. The development of our programme, "Something for Something", will be a crucial part of solving that equation.

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): Today is certainly an historic occasion. Is my right hon. Friend aware that this is the first time in the 12 years that I have been in the House that I have been able to congratulate the Government on increasing spending on education? Is he further aware that over a year ago I said in the House that I did not believe that the amount of money that would be saved from the assisted places scheme would be enough to pay for reducing class sizes and that more money would have to be found? I am delighted that the Secretary of State has taken my advice on that issue.

I apologise for going over this matter again, but my right hon. Friend is aware that I have been deeply involved with the National Union of Teachers for many years and that miserly awards were granted by the previous Government. Will my right hon. Friend guarantee that, out of the money that is being made available for education, schoolteachers will get the increases in their salaries that they richly deserve and have not received for nearly 20 years?

Mr. Blunkett: I am genuinely pleased to bask in the congratulations of my hon. Friend, particularly because they come so rarely to me, and I am grateful. I confirm that there have been unfortunately low settlements, but there has also been a disparity year on year and a lack of continuity and consistency. If, with a three-year settlement, we can gradually build up over the next three years to achieving our goals, not only in rewarding

teachers but in investing to enable them to do their job better, we shall receive the applause of parents and teachers at the end of that period.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the private finance initiative will still play a crucial role in providing new schools and that his package will enable that initiative to be accelerated? Will he further confirm that a new list is due to appear this month and—the Minister for School Standards is whispering to him, with my approval—does he recognise the importance of the North Yorkshire primary schools that are candidates for that list, given that it would be the first time that Church schools were included in the PFI?

Mr. Blunkett: I can confirm that my hon. Friend was whispering in my ear, but I cannot confirm what he was whispering. I can, however, confirm that there will be a minimum of £350 million a year of PFI credits and that within the next few weeks we shall consider the distribution of those resources.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My right hon. Friend will know that in Norfolk, where we were particularly pleased to hear the death knell called on the nursery voucher, people will welcome the advance in nursery provision for three-year-olds. How will that be phased and what steps will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that the difficult rural areas, which present different problems for nursery education, are treated equitably with areas where it might be physically easier to introduce the new programme?

Mr. Blunkett: It is important that we correctly implement that policy in rural areas. As my hon. Friend will know from his time as chair of education in Norfolk and in the House, we have introduced ways in which we are supporting and encouraging collaboration between the different sectors. The early years partnerships are already playing a significant role in engaging voluntary as well as private and statutory provision, to make it possible imaginatively to deliver the programme.

In rural areas, we need to use imagination, so that we can provide services on a peripatetic basis and encourage, as we are doing in urban areas, the integration of nursery education and child care. The "Sure Start" programme, which is very close to the heart of my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health, will be developing, and we shall be able to illustrate over the weeks ahead how that will integrate imaginatively with health provision, including health centres, GP practices and post-natal provision, and break down the barriers between the different approaches to the family and the child in the crucial early years.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Given the amount of substandard accommodation and accommodation in need of repair that is in use throughout the nation, and presuming that Northern Ireland will also receive a doubling of the sums to be spent on refurbishing, repairs and rebuilding, what is the Secretary of State's time scale for ensuring that all school accommodation attains a proper standard?

Mr. Blunkett: I can guarantee a doubling of expenditure by the end of the three-year spending review, but I cannot guarantee that every school in every part of the United Kingdom will have reached the standard that the hon. Gentleman and I would like them to achieve. I hope that we shall get very close to attaining that standard. I hope that the combination of measures that we have announced, including the development of spending on the learning grid, will enable us to bring our schools to a standard of which every parent can be proud.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, as part of the programme, there is adequate co-ordination with other Departments? The programme at Wolverham school in my constituency engages adults in adult learning and enables them to participate in the new deal arrangements. That imaginative programme is particularly important for schools in poorer communities. We must ensure that there is maximum collaboration between all agencies, so that we continue to get the best value for money.

Mr. Blunkett: I could not agree more. I make it clear that the resources being allocated, including resources that we want to target on what is known as non-schedule 2 adult education, will be crucial to giving people new access to further and higher education. The agenda set out by Baroness Kennedy and Professor Fryer will be close to the hearts of all of those who want to overturn exclusion and ensure that there is an inclusion agenda for further and higher education and for lifelong learning.

Mr. Hayes: I thought that I should ask one of my own questions instead of trying to intervene upon my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts).

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has assessed the impact on the potential increase in teachers' pay of inflation and the cost of the standards fund? The LEAs in Labour-controlled Nottinghamshire and Conservative-controlled Lincolnshire are telling teachers, parents and governors that the increases in the past year about which the Secretary of State has spoken so grandly have not had an impact in the classroom because those issues have affected the amount of money reaching schools.

Mr. Blunkett: I make it absolutely clear that the contribution of 50 per cent. from central Government—which will ensure that the literacy programme and other essential initiatives that raise standards are carried through in the classroom—is a promise, not a threat. I believe that giving local authorities 50 per cent. more than they would have received in order to do what they should already be doing is a very good deal.

If Lincolnshire had passported the money to the education service, which could have then passported it to schools, we would not have the disgraceful picture of such low allocations. That shows what the Conservatives think about when they allocate money to education. Lincolnshire county council under the Tories has mirrored the miserly and measly allocations that central Government under the Tory party gave to the nation as a whole.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the churlish and mean-spirited diatribe from the Opposition Front Bench explains why hon. Members on the Tory Benches look as sick as parrots while everyone on the Labour Benches looks over the moon? May I congratulate the Secretary of State on

[Mr. Derek Foster]

achieving 5 per cent. per annum real growth in education and employment spending? That allows the most challenging of our election pledges to be fulfilled—that is, increasing the proportion of gross domestic product spent on education over time. I now urge my right hon. Friend to give equal focus to dealing with the productivity gap that the Chancellor has identified as being crucial to the success of the Government's economic and financial strategy. Will my right hon. Friend give to that objective the same focus that he is giving to the schools agenda?

Mr. Blunkett: I cannot confirm the health of the parrots, but I did hear one fall off a perch, so nailing them to it is obviously the task. The issue that my right hon. Friend has raised is important. I believe that, with the active work of the Education and Employment Committee, we shall be able to make progress in that area.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): May I draw on my experience as chairman of the governors of St. Vincent sixth-form college in my constituency to express regret that there was only a passing reference to sixth-form colleges in the Secretary of State's statement? Does the Secretary of State agree that sixth-form colleges have used their independence under the Further Education Funding Council extremely well, making considerable improvements in efficiency? Does he agree, however, that sixth-form colleges receive only 80 per cent. of the amount per student received by neighbouring sixth forms? What does he propose to do about that?

Mr. Blunkett: I intend to do a damn sight more than the previous Government did. I am genuinely mindful that there is a disparity, and that sixth-form colleges are delivering high-quality, high-standard education with lower allocations. The 8.2 per cent. cash increase for further education is crucial to helping us narrow that gap. However, I also intend to establish a standards fund for further education, which will assist with sixth-form college provision, and I wish to talk to the Local Government Association about how we, over a long period, can narrow the gap between the amount of money that goes into sixth forms and the amount that goes into sixth-form colleges, without in any way threatening existing provision for sixth forms.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Will my right hon. Friend comment on the difference between a local practical reality and Conservative Members' rhetoric? Can he confirm that Ministers have recognised that it is as a result of the failures of the Conservative party over the past 18 years that my county of Derbyshire has suffered so severely? Can he also confirm, and accept my congratulations on it, that a token of the early pledges that are being implemented is that, as a result of that recognition, in Derbyshire the number of infants in classes of more than 30 will next year decrease from the scandalous figure of 13,000 to 1,000? Does he agree that another token of the early pledges is that six—yes, six—schools in my constituency with outside toilets are to have them removed? Does he further agree that that was the legacy of failure that the Conservatives left us?

Does my right hon. Friend accept that there will be problems in providing buildings to accommodate the extra classes that will be produced by the reduction in class sizes? Does he agree, however, that, with the ingenuity, flexibility and co-operation with their schools of county councils such as Derbyshire while the buildings problem is being tackled, that problem can be solved if there is good will and determination?

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I believe that the determination and the will of Derbyshire county council will bear fruit from this September, as my hon. Friend described; obviously, the £1 million revenue that we have allocated is being used effectively and wisely. We obviously recognise that, as I said in my statement, capital is crucial to delivery. That is why, of the £620 million announced, £160 million of capital will be earmarked specifically for use in tackling that problem.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the Secretary of State recognise that, although the extra resources will be very welcome in Northumberland, even the Labour-controlled local education authority would want me to remind him of the huge disparities that the standard spending assessment system creates? Under that system, whereas the equivalent of £1,800 is spent on each secondary school child in Northumberland, £3,200 is spent on each similar child in Kensington and Chelsea. Does he realise how important the review of that system is? The amounts produced today, valuable though they are, will not fill that gap.

Mr. Blunkett: The right hon. Gentleman will be very pleased to hear that I agree with him. A situation that results in Torbay being regarded as more deprived than Sheffield is bound to get my gall up. We do need to tackle that problem. However, the questions asked in Prime Minister's questions this afternoon illustrated what a long, hard and difficult haul it will be to redistribute resources. Although one authority may receive £1 million more for a single secondary school than another authority receives for a school in a different part of the country, the former will not want those resources to be removed. Consequently, increasing resources and distributing fairly must go hand in hand.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend will not be aware that I spent my constituency week visiting schools in my constituency—both those within and those without the education service. I can assure him that his statement this afternoon was eagerly awaited, and its contents will be greatly welcomed by all the teachers whom I met. Of the great sums that he announced today, can he tell us what percentage and, in absolute terms, what sum will go in increases for teachers and ancillary staff in schools, so that they will know that if they give something, they will be properly rewarded? As far as I am concerned, all my teachers are super teachers.

Mr. Blunkett: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We are committed to retaining the School Teachers Review Body, and we are committed to its independence. We shall submit evidence to it in due course that will outline for the year ahead, and I hope on a three-year basis as well, how we intend to meet the challenge of balancing inflationary pressures and the necessary rewards for high

performance. I am sure that my hon. Friend would not expect me to pre-empt the School Teachers Review Body report even before I have submitted the evidence to it.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): How will the Government find the extra teachers for their expansion plans, when they have announced a tightening of the guidelines for pay review bodies, which decoded means that teachers' remuneration will become less attractive to potential new recruits?

Mr. Blunkett: I have not decoded our announcement in that way. I have decoded it as placing emphasis on reward and retention, morale, and ensuring that we can recruit and retain the highest level of graduates into the profession. We want to attract into the teaching profession not just new entrants from university taking the postgraduate certificate in education, but people with life experience. We want them to come back in, recognising the part that they can play and being well rewarded for it.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Will my right hon. Friend accept particular congratulations on the extra £250 million that is going into further education? That is a good riposte to the excellent Select Committee report that has just been produced. I know that the further education college and sixth-form college in my constituency will be especially grateful. Over the next three years, will my right hon. Friend also look closely at the way in which the further and higher education sectors co-operate? If the target of an extra 500,000 students is to be reached, there must be the closest co-operation because, as many of us know, people start in FE and progress to HE later.

Mr. Blunkett: I can confirm that co-operation is important. Lord Dearing's report placed emphasis on the development of sub-degree higher education courses. We should see how further education can play its part in linking initial access, level 2 and level 3 qualifications and higher education. That is an important part of creating a ladder of learning, so that lifelong learning means exactly that.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Lord Dearing's report placed great emphasis on retaining the student grant. Does the Secretary of State have anything to say about the fact that in the year to 2000, his proposals will take £600 million out of the pockets of the neediest students and not put a penny of that money back, even into higher education?

Mr. Blunkett: I cannot confirm that. It seems to have escaped the hon. Gentleman that in the current year, from this autumn, under present cash accounting systems, we are paying out the money to ensure that students do not lose out in the coming year. They will, of course, be paying back over time. We have about £200 million in the coming year from the independent fee contribution. That is all the new money from the changes in the coming year. We are more than matching that with the £280 million that I announced this afternoon, and with the massive investment in research and the science base of our universities, from which all our universities will gain enormously.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I welcome the £50 million for research, but can the Department do something about the problem of short-term research contracts? Researchers are living from hand to mouth, and cannot produce their best science. May I be forgiven a naughty question? What on earth were we all doing on Monday in this place at midnight?

Mr. Blunkett: The answer to my hon. Friend's second question appears to be, "Playing silly so-and-sos," but I am delighted that we reached a sensible solution, and I thank all who helped that solution on its way. As for the first question, I believe that there is a genuine problem in regard to short-term contracts. The introduction of such contracts was a feature of the current instability. I hope that, as we develop a three-year funding regime by means of the dual system involving the Science and Engineering Research Council and the Higher Education Funding Council, we shall be able to introduce more stability and consistency, enabling people to take on researchers and research assistants under a more equitable and acceptable contract system.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I assure the Secretary of State that I shall encourage North Yorkshire county council and City of York council—as I always have—to spend on education whatever money he passports to them. However, this year's increase in the education budget meant a 14 per cent. council tax increase in North Yorkshire. What increases will be necessary in future to fund the extra expenditure that the Secretary of State has announced today?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also assure us that, in rural areas, the class size limit of 30 will not be imposed so rigidly that young children will be required to travel long distances to school?

Mr. Blunkett: All the money that I have announced is allocated from central Government. Obviously, local government will also contribute resources raised through the council tax, with which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will deal separately.

As for class sizes in rural areas, my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has made it clear on several occasions in the House that we seek to ensure that children need not travel unacceptable distances so that the class size pledge is met.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement of the "Sure Start" programme, which will help to break the cycle of poverty and deprivation, which means that many children will fail before they even start school. I know that the programme will also be welcomed by many schools in my constituency that must deal with the consequences of the failure to give children a proper start in life.

Will my right hon. Friend tell us a little more about the programme? How will it be targeted towards the most deprived areas, where it is most needed?

Mr. Blunkett: I thank my hon. Friend for her support. We are beginning a long-overdue process of getting people to work together closely at local level, and it is from such local partnerships that programmes such as this should grow. There will be an inter-ministerial group. Such a group already exists, chaired by my hon. Friend

[Mr. Blunkett]

the Minister for Public Health. She, along with Ministers from my Department, recommends to me the direction in which we should go—targeting resources, but also ensuring that we can back the imaginative programmes that have already been started with health visitors, school nurses and the development of primary health care practice, linking all that with child care and nursery provision and extending the early excellence centres so ably fostered by the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris).

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) in congratulating the Secretary of State on securing such a good deal from the Chancellor. I particularly welcome the money that is going into universities, and the additional £1.1 billion announced yesterday by the President of the Board of Trade.

I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that, for universities and colleges, one of the great injustices of past years has been the per capita funding decrease. That has continued year by year, certainly for the past 10 years. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure us that the figures that he has announced, and his plans for the period up to the end of this Parliament, will involve a per capita increase in spending on both further and higher education that is above the rate of inflation and will provide colleges and universities with genuine new money and security?

Mr. Blunkett: The genuine money is there. It is committed. We are combining increased access with a reinforcement of quality. I mentioned the standards fund that I intend to establish for further education. The real-terms increase for further education will be 5.5 per cent. and that for universities will be 3 per cent.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his announcement and particularly welcome the extra funding for further education. Widnes sixth-form college in my constituency suffered a 25 per cent. cut in its resources under the policies of the previous Government, so the announcement will be particularly welcomed there. Will not his announcement also be recognised as a confirmation of the importance of the FE sector in increasing skills, competitiveness and training in the economy?

Mr. Blunkett: I hope that it will. Further education, including sixth-form colleges, has been the Cinderella of the education service. It has been neglected by the media and by politicians—not by Labour Members, but certainly by the previous Government. In allocating resources this year and for the following two years, I want to ensure that those who write and comment on politics and education who have never had experience of further education are not allowed to get away with it any longer. The crucial role of further education in skilling our people and in giving access to the disadvantaged must be recognised, so that we can put it on a par with the areas of education that receive greater attention.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): May I welcome the extra £50 million for university research, along with all the other money that has been announced this week? About 12 universities spend about 50 per cent. of this country's research investment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that his announcement will give an opportunity for extra money to trickle down into universities whose research departments have been struggling in recent years?

Mr. Blunkett: It will make an enormous difference. In our allocations to the research councils and the Higher Education Funding Council, we must ensure that the next research assessment exercise is fairer and more equitable than the last.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): A hard-bitten and cynical vice-chancellor to whom I spoke this morning said that he felt like rushing outside and dancing in the street after hearing about the treatment of the higher education sector. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the vast increase in the resources going to higher education in particular, but does he accept that that is only half the battle? Money can still be frittered away. Poorly performing schools, departments or colleges can waste money as well as using it well. Will he redouble the Government's efforts to learn from best practice and reward productivity, good management and leadership, to ensure that the money is well spent every day and every month until we get the results that we all want?

Mr. Blunkett: I respect my hon. Friend's long-standing commitment. I believe that we should do that because value for money in every area is critical. The picture of a vice-chancellor dancing in the street intrigues me. If my hon. Friend can get the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals to agree to dance with him, we shall all have a barney in Parliament square that will set the world alight once and for all.

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): I recently visited the nursery at the YMCA in Welwyn Garden City. The staff there will be delighted by this afternoon's announcement. They told me that they wanted their work to be celebrated more by the Government. Today's announcement gives a clear message to all the staff working in the under-five sector about the value that the Government place on their work. I hope that my right hon. Friend will endorse those comments.

I am slightly concerned about work with pre-school playgroups. I know that, through partnerships and additional funding, we have ensured that the fall-out from the Conservatives' nursery voucher policy has been minimised. Will my right hon. Friend say a few words about how he will continue to ensure that the voluntary pre-school sector will help to contribute to our many achievements in under-five provision as a result of today's announcement?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes; as I said earlier, early years partnerships are vital. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Yardley, will not approve early years partnership programmes unless they are collaborative and meaningfully involve the voluntary and private sectors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson) will know, we have allocated additional resources this year to protect viable and flourishing playgroups. We are in discussion at the

moment on ensuring that allocation is transparent and fair. I am very keen to ensure that the Pre-School Learning Alliance and similar groups can play an essential part in encouraging their members to be part of the partnership and to make imaginative and flexible provision on the ground, which involves parents. The great advantage of "Sure Start" is that it links the parent and the needs of the child. There is no more obvious example of that than Pre-School Learning Alliance activity, in which parents are part of the process and of the solution.

Adjournment Debates

4.26 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I should like to make a low-key point of order of which I think you have had notice from the Clerks. It concerns the debate on climate change that was initiated this morning by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). I am not getting at the Opposition spokesman in that debate, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), but, in an hour and a half's debate, he spoke for longer than the Minister, who had only nine minutes to reply.

The Chair has been very good to me, and I feel a little coy about raising the matter. Nevertheless, are not the one-and-a-half-hour Adjournment debates the successor of debates on the Consolidated Fund? The tradition in debates on the Consolidated Fund was that matters were raised by Back-Bench Members of Parliament and replied to by the Minister, and were not subject to Opposition spokesmen, who had many other opportunities to speak.

Madam Speaker: I am delighted that the hon. Member has raised this matter. I regard Adjournment debates, particularly those on a Wednesday morning, to be the province of Back-Bench Members. Since we have had these debates, I have tried to restrict Government, official Opposition and Liberal Democrat spokesmen to 10 minutes, which I think is reasonable. I looked at the record of this morning's proceedings and found that the Liberal Democrat spokesman spoke for 13 minutes, which I think is unwarranted. As both Government and Opposition Whips know, I have always maintained that I will not allow spokespersons speaking for political parties during Adjournment debates to take more than their 10 minutes. Adjournment debates to my mind are for Back-Bench Members; I want to hear from them. It is the period during which they can express themselves. I hope that those responsible will take heed of what I have said in response to the point of order. I thank the hon. Member for raising it.

BILLS PRESENTED

Northern Ireland

Secretary Marjorie Mowlam, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Cook, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Robertson, Mr. Secretary Davies and Mr. Paul Murphy, presented a Bill to make new provision for the government of Northern Ireland for the purpose of implementing the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland set out in Command Paper 3883: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 229].

Participants in Sporting Events (Assaults, Etc.)

Mr. Paul Flynn presented a Bill to make provision with respect to offences involving the intentional striking of blows to the head by participants in sporting events: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 9 October, and to be printed [Bill 230].

Community Reinvestment Disclosure

4.28 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require financial institutions to maintain and to publish details of their lending and financial services to individuals, businesses and organisations by postcode; to ensure that redlining of neighbourhoods does not take place; and to ensure that regeneration objectives are met through a public private partnership of the financial institutions together with central and local government.

In seeking support for the Bill, I have spoken to several financial institutions, including banks, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority. I pay tribute to the research and advocacy of the New Economics Foundation and its executive directive, Ed Mayo. I pay particular tribute to the inspirational leadership of the Citizen's bank in New England in the United States, by Larry Fish and Scott Kisting, who first drew my attention to the great opportunities that lie in community reinvestment disclosure. None the less, I must make it clear that the views that I now express are mine alone.

I believe that there is a real economic injustice in the United Kingdom at the moment, whereby, simply because of where they live and work, individuals, businesses and organisations cannot access credit or other financial services.

The evidence is patchy and anecdotal, but the Office of Fair Trading review of financial services for vulnerable consumers, due in the autumn, will add to our knowledge of the problem. Individual financial institutions have told me about other financial institutions "red-lining". Nobody knows the full situation, only that it exists. That is why I am bringing forward my proposal for disclosure.

The concept of the Bill is built on the success in the United States of the Community Reinvestment Act and the associated Home Mortgage Disclosure Act. The United States Treasury estimates that, because of those two Acts, US retail banks have committed about $300 billion to low or moderate-income neighbourhoods, and discovered that such lending can be profitable.

Those two Acts have within them the sanction of withdrawal of the US banking charter should the American regulator not be satisfied with the performance of individual banks in fulfilling the requirements of the Acts. I do not propose such a power for any regulator in the United Kingdom. However, my research leads me to believe that banks and financial institutions want a legal framework to require them to disclose any red-lining—that is, any areas where they have chosen not to offer loans and other financial instruments. I envisage self-certification with a light touch of regulation or investigation by the FSA on an exception basis.

There are practical options for developing disclosure so that it is affordable—for example, by covering only a selected range of key financial products—and appropriate, which may mean, for example, enabling creative and responsible partnerships to emerge, which can promote reinvestment and regeneration. It should also be fair, and apply on a self-certification basis to all relevant financial institutions.

Like the American Act, the Bill proposes that any lending or other financial instruments so offered be "within prudential requirements". I do not suggest that those who cannot afford it be given such credit. We are talking about under-served markets. We are not asking banks to act as charities, simply not to discriminate in their activity as banks.

My concern is to ensure that people who can afford credit are not deemed unworthy simply because of where they live. The closure of bank branches has been justified on the basis of cost and the alternative availability of telephone banking, but that has meant that people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have lost their local knowledgeable managers, who knew to whom to give credit. Instead, they have been given, in telephone banking, a system whose first question is, "What is your address and postcode?" If people answer that question "wrongly", the conversation is terminated, whatever their financial situation may be. I believe that credit scoring by area is also rife in banking circles.

I know the difficulty that people in my constituency have in obtaining a mortgage on former council properties in certain areas. Over the past 10 years, the proportion of low-income households in the United Kingdom able to obtain home contents insurance has dropped from 70 to 40 per cent.

However, if we scratch the surface of any low-income community in the United Kingdom, we find a surprising level of economic activity. Low-income households patch together income from a variety of sources. They can make good use of credit and financial services. Indeed, there is increasing evidence from groups such as the New Economics Foundation that low-income communities have demonstrated the capacity to create jobs and economic activity. The withdrawal of financial services is therefore detrimental to all the efforts of the Government, as well as of the people themselves, to promote economic opportunity for employment and regeneration.

Excellent models exist of community finance initiatives, ranging from credit unions to community loan funds, operating in low-income areas. Yet, even with regulatory change, those are small in relation to the need, and, in any case, can often develop only in partnership with outside financiers. The Bill would improve the prospect of that happening, to the benefit of the people whom such initiatives serve.

I do not know the full extent of red-lining in the United Kingdom. I believe that it is in the interests of the United Kingdom economy that we should know. There is a commitment to private-public partnerships to regenerate disadvantaged areas. Here is a way in which banks and financial institutions can play their part in ensuring that regeneration takes place, and is not held up because of a flaw in the market availability of credit and financial instruments.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the £800 million new deal for communities. As part of the public-private partnership for those communities, I hope that the Bill will go forward with the support of the banks and financial institutions of the UK. At this point in the parliamentary Session, a miracle would be needed for the Bill to be passed into law. I hope that the considerable support that the Bill has could lead to the Government taking the matter forward. If not, I will be back next Session.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Giles Radice, Mr. Malcolm Bruce, Sir Peter Lloyd, Sir Michael Spicer, Mr. Charles Clarke, Ms Ruth Kelly, Ms Hazel Blears, Dr. Alan Whitehead and Mr. Chris Mullin.

COMMUNITY REINVESTMENT DISCLOSURE

Mr. Tony Colman accordingly presented a Bill to require financial institutions to maintain and to publish details of their lending and financial services to individuals, businesses and organisations by postcode; to ensure that redlining of neighbourhoods does not take place; and to ensure that regeneration objectives are met through a public-private partnership of the financial institutions together with central and local government: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 231].

Orders of the Day

CONSOLIDATED FUND (APPROPRIATION) (No. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills), and agreed to.*

Question, That the Bill be now read the Third time, *put forthwith, and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

School Standards and Framework Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Clause 1

POWER TO SET LIMITS ON INFANT CLASS SIZES.

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 1, line 9, leave out subsections (1) to (3) and insert—

"(1) The Secretary of State shall by regulations—

(a) impose a limit on class sizes for infant classes at maintained schools; and

(b) specify the school years in relation to which any such limit is to have effect.

(2) Any limit imposed under this section shall specify the maximum number of pupils that a class to which the limit applies may contain while an ordinary teaching session is conducted by a single qualified teacher.

(2A) Subject to subsections (3) and (3A), regulations under this section shall be so framed that—

(a) the maximum number specified in pursuance of subsection (2) is 30, and

(b) that limit has effect in relation to the 2001–02 school year and any subsequent year.

(3) Regulations under this section may—

(a) provide for any limit imposed under this section to take effect—

(i) at the same time in the case of each of the age groups into which the pupils in infant classes fall, or

(ii) at different times (which may be earlier than the beginning of the school year mentioned in subsection (2A)) in the case of different such age groups;

(b) provide that, in any circumstances specified in the regulations, any such limit either is not to apply or is to operate in such manner as is so specified.

(3A) The Secretary of State may by order amend subsection (2A)—

(a) by substituting for "30" such other number as is specified in the order; or

(b) by substituting for the reference to the 2001–02 school year a reference to such other school year as is so specified.")

4.38 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2, 3, 108, 150, 151, 327, 331, 332 and 408.

Mr. Byers: I shall try to be as brief as possible so that the House can spend longer on the issues where there is clearly disagreement about the approach adopted in the House of Lords.

The amendments seek to implement the recommendations of the Deregulation Committee that a class size limit of 30 should appear in the Bill. The amendments achieve that objective, which the Government support. They also provide that the time limit by which the class size pledge should be introduced should be the year 2001-02. That is the legal deadline, as it were, by which the class size pledge should be introduced.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said this afternoon, we intend to introduce that pledge from September 2001, although, as a result of the comprehensive spending review, we will be able to provide resources to local education authorities and Church authorities to allow them to implement the pledge from September 2000, if that is their wish. The amendments meet the requirements of the Deregulation Committee, and I commend them to the House.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I assure the Minister that I do not intend to delay proceedings on technical matters, although there are a number of groupings of amendments—where it is proposed not to disagree with the Lords—where we will wish to make some comments. We have had lively debates about class sizes on a number of occasions, and I will not reopen the issue as a whole.

I note in passing that there are no fewer than 260 Government amendments from the Lords. The Government have been amending the Bill right up to the last minute—they have constantly had to make changes—which suggests that they did not think through all its practical implications.

I have two questions on class sizes. They have been put to Ministers and to the Secretary of State in various debates, but we have not yet received answers to them. The first is technical; I was asked it by a head teacher when I visited a school in my constituency on Monday. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) asked the same question in the Opposition Supply day debate on class sizes, but, as I recall, he did not receive a response. It concerns the definition of a class that contains mixed ages. When does a class of five and six-year-olds or of six and seven-year-olds—or, after the infant stage, of seven and eight-year-olds—count as one to which the 30 limit applies? When a class contains a mixture of seven and eight-year-olds, will it be the majority of children's ages that count in determining whether the limit applies?

The second question is not technical; it goes to the heart of whether the Government can implement their class size pledge. The Minister will know that many people have raised the matter of parental choice. The Local Government Association has made it clear that the class size pledge can be implemented only by a reduction in parental choice. Will the Minister reassure the House—he and the Secretary of State were asked this in the Opposition Supply day debate—that children will not be turned away from a school that their parents want them to attend because of the class size limit of 30?

Mr. Byers: The 260 Government amendments have improved the Bill; very often, they were tabled as a result of the comments made by Opposition Members. We make no apology for that, as we believe that the Bill is now far better because of the changes that we have been prepared to make along the way after listening to Opposition Members, to the Churches and to parents. By working in partnership, we now have a Bill that will introduce a new school structure framework that has broad and popular support—that is why I very much commend the Bill to the House.

The Bill will create a legal requirement on local education authorities to produce plans to reduce class sizes. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) will

know that we have sent out regulations for consultation; if she looks carefully at them, she will see that there is a clear requirement that local authorities will have to give regard to the expression of parental preference in bringing forward their plans for the Secretary of State, and that the Secretary of State will not approve plans that do not give regard to parental preference.

Conservative legislation never stipulated parental choice; it provided for an ability to express parental preference. We have made it clear that the expression of parental preference, which we are retaining, will not be hindered in any way by the introduction of the Bill's measures on class sizes.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead also asked what constituted a class for five, six and seven-year-olds. The definition is contained in the Bill; I cannot lay my hands on it immediately, but I shall write to her and give her the reference. With those comments, I hope that we can agree to the Lords amendments.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clause 6

PREPARATION OF EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Lords amendment: No. 4, in page 4, line 35, at end insert—

("( ) In preparing an education development plan the authority shall have regard, in particular, to the education of children (within the meaning of subsection (2)) who have special educational needs.")

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

In Committee, many hon. Members expressed the desire that the Bill should require express provision in education development plans for children with special educational needs. I made the point both then and on Report that it was not technically necessary, as there was a requirement on local authorities to address the needs of all children in their area in their EDPs.

4.45 pm

However, several peers felt that the needs of SEN children would be better protected if provision were written into the Bill. We are happy to agree, and to state beyond any possibility of doubt that we expect local authorities to state in their EDPs how they intend to address the needs of every child, including SEN children. I commend the Lords amendment to the House.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): How will local authorities describe categories of special educational needs, or will a generic term be used? For example, will SEN children be only those who are statemented or will those who are unstatemented but for whom classroom assistance has been provided be included? How will the categorisation be written in the Bill?

Ms Morris: I know that the hon. Lady takes a close interest in the subject, and she will know that there is no standard definition of SEN. Each local authority interprets it in its own way. We are investigating that in our consideration of responses to the Green Paper. I would expect local authorities to use their own definition of SEN and, as a rule of thumb, I would want them to provide an explanation of what they are doing to raise standards for all the children, for example, on each of the five stages in the code of practice.

There is no way out, because, however a local authority chooses to define SEN, it is still answerable for raising standards for every single child. The reason for the amendment—and why we are happy to accede to it—is merely to remove any fear that SEN would be a bolt-on to local authorities' thinking. However local authorities define SEN, those needs and that local definition must be addressed in an annexe to their EDP.

I accept the hon. Lady's signal that there is a real need for a discussion of the legal definition of SEN. We will do that at a later date.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) for her comments. We had a debate on this subject in Committee, and it would have been nice if the Government had accepted the point then, but we are grateful that they have done so now. It is important that there should be a specific requirement on local education authorities to include provision for children with special educational needs in their education development plans.

The Minister's answer concerns me somewhat. I recognise that there is a practical difficulty, in that different definitions are used by different local authorities, but it would be unfortunate if the inclusion of the amendment left some children out and did not ensure that they were properly covered in the plan. I wonder whether the Government have any intention of examining EDPs when the LEAs submit them, to ensure that all categories of children with special educational needs are being properly catered for, regardless of the definition used, and that no children fall out of the net.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I should remind the House that this is not the Committee stage of the Bill when hon. Members can speak several times. When the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) resumed her seat, no one else was rising, which is why I called the Minister to sum up the debate. Technically, I cannot allow her to speak again in the debate on this amendment. If hon. Members would bear that in mind, we might proceed in a more orderly fashion.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 10

ESTABLISHMENT OF EDUCATION ACTION ZONES

Lords amendment: No. 5, in page 10, line 5, at end insert

(", or

(b) with a view to enabling it to achieve improving standards in the provision of education once it becomes a maintained school, any new school which has a temporary governing body.")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 6 to 10, 166, 187 to 189 and 358.

Mr. Byers: This group of amendments covers three broad areas. The first group deals with clause 10, as a

[Mr. Byers]

difficulty may exist with schools that were created once an education action zone had been established. A school may close or schools may merge and, as the regulations and the Bill stood before consideration in the Lords, such new schools would not be part of the zone. Amendments Nos. 5 to 7 remedy that potential weakness and would allow a new school that is created within the zone to be fully a part of it, which is an appropriate way forward.

The amendments to clause 13 deal with the procedure and means by which disapplication of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 1991 will take place. The amendments ensure that all governing bodies, including those that are not the legal employer of the teacher, have the power to disapply a teacher's pay and conditions document, if they wish. It is appropriate that all governing bodies should have that important power. We commend those amendments to the House.

The final group deals with the accounts of education action zones being audited and made available to the National Audit Office, which is an appropriate way forward, and the amendments would also ensure that education action forums have charitable status. That is particularly important because such status will act as an incentive to private companies making donations in cash or in kind to the forums. Obviously, certain tax concessions will be available as a result of the forums having charitable status.

Those three groups of amendments are important, and I commend them to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 6 to 10 agreed to.

Clause 15

CASES WHERE LEA MAY EXERCISE POWERS OF INTERVENTION

Lords amendment: No. 11, in page 13, line 11, after ("notice") insert ("in writing")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 13 to 18.

Mr. Byers: The prime responsibility for improving a school that is failing must rest with the school. We will all have failed if we allow a school to drift into failure. It is far better for the school and the individual children concerned for intervention to be early and light before the school fails, rather than waiting until it is underperforming, needs special measures and intervention has to be heavy.

Amendments Nos. 11 and 13 would give the local education authority a responsibility to put in writing its view that a school was drifting towards failure. That power of intervention is important before a school needs to be put under special measures. Because of the importance of that approach, the amendments would ensure that the local education authority has to give notice of its concerns in writing, which is an appropriate course.

Amendments Nos. 14, 15, 16 and 17 to clause 16 put right an omission. They allow Church authorities to take action at voluntary-aided schools on the same footing as local education authorities do at their schools. The Church authorities raised the matter, and we are pleased to meet their concern.

Amendment No. 18 was tabled in the other place to meet representations from the Church authorities about the appointment of additional governors to voluntary-aided schools when they enter into special measures. The Secretary of State has the power to appoint additional governors in those circumstances, but it is appropriate that he should consult relevant diocesan authorities, particularly about which individuals should be appointed to such a governing body. The Church authorities have welcomed the amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 12, in page 13, line 13, at end insert

("(whether or not the notice is combined with a notice under section 61(2A)(c)).")

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 74 to 84, 129, 279 to 281, 375 and 397.

Ms Morris: The major amendments in this group are our response to the publication of the report on truancy and school exclusions. That was much discussed in Committee, and we said that we might return to it. We have amended the Bill to give the Secretary of State a new power to require the governing bodies of maintained schools to set targets for reduction in unauthorised absence where their attendance levels are below average. All evidence shows that children who miss school—for short periods or long—are more likely to leave school without formal qualifications and without making the most of their abilities. They are most likely to become socially excluded in adult life as well as in childhood.

We have introduced new safeguards to ensure that schools cannot too readily exclude pupils. A balance is needed on exclusions. We are not taking away from schools the right to exclude, which is sometimes necessary, and which must be a decision for the head teacher and the governing body. However, we are determined to reduce exclusions and to ensure that schools do not use them as a weapon when other tools might be better.

The amendment would require head teachers and governors to have regard to guidance on exclusion. Previously, the guidance could be considered if heads and governors wished, but there was no legal requirement on them to have regard to it. We hope that that will bring coherence to reasons for exclusion. One explanation for the vastly different numbers of children excluded by different schools is the criteria in use.

There was strong support in the other place for a specific reference in the Bill to bullying. No one would disagree with our requiring schools, ourselves, local authorities, parents and communities to ensure that children are neither bullied nor bullies. We are happy to accept amendment No. 74, which requires head teachers to determine measures as part of a school's discipline policy to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils.

Amendments Nos. 75 and 76 make life easier for local authorities that want to invoke clauses 61, 60 and 70. The amendments will allow local authorities to use powers flexibly without having to serve different types of notices, as that would be confusing as well as unnecessarily bureaucratic.

Amendments Nos. 279, 280 and 281 make minor changes to the process for hearing parental appeals against permanent exclusion of their child. Amendments Nos. 78, 80 to 83, 129 and 375 are technical and deal with flaws in the Bill. I commend the amendments to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 13 to 18 agreed to.

Clause 20

NEW CATEGORIES OF MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Lords amendment: No. 19, in page 18, line 35, at beginning insert ("(subject to subsection (4A))")

5 pm

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 20, 21, 31, 145, 255 and 409.

Mr. Byers: I am always surprised when a relatively small change requires so many amendments, but that is the way of parliamentary counsel.

It will normally be the case under the new framework that a grant-maintained school, in moving into the new framework, will be maintained by the local education authority in whose area that school is situated. However, there may be isolated cases where schools are located within a particular local education authority area where, perhaps for historical or traditional reasons, the bulk of the children attending the school may be resident in a neighbouring local education authority. In those circumstances, the local education authority with the majority of children attending the school may feel that it is the appropriate body to take responsibility for maintaining the school. This may apply to only a handful of schools, but we must ensure that clause 20 is amended to allow a local education authority in those circumstances to appeal to the Secretary of State and make representations so that it can take responsibility for maintaining the school.

The amendment provides that, by 30 November 1998, a former maintaining local education authority, or the local education authority in whose area the school is situated, may appeal to the Secretary of State. We feel that that is an appropriate course of action and agree with the amendments.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the Minister consider a small issue relating to amendments Nos. 20 and 21 that is of great significance to my constituents? He said that an appeal can be made to the Secretary of State. Southend-on-Sea has four grant-aided grammar schools that provide for 25 per cent. of its children. We are entitled to keep that arrangement as long as the local people support it. Additional places go to children from other authorities. As a result of our 25 per cent. rule, the standard demanded of a Southend child is different from that demanded of a child from outside. This has been our situation for some time.

We support the arrangement because the 25 per cent. rule gives an opportunity for children to break through. Our education results are better than those for the rest of Essex. As is the case for Northern Ireland, our results are better overall than those of England, Scotland and Wales. Will the amendments and the change of category from grant-aided to community or foundation school status change other things of which the House is not aware?

The change that we have in mind is the Greenwich judgment, which resulted from legislation passed by the previous Government, and undermined the provision for an authority to make a special demand, such as the 25 per cent. rule for children in Southend-on-Sea. We escaped the judgment because we were able to argue that it should not apply to grant-aided schools. If the judgment applied, it would mean that Southend's grammar schools would be open to applications from anyone who wanted to come to them from other parts of Essex. As the Minister well knows, many people from places near Southend would like their children to go there. I appreciate that there is an argument for the Greenwich judgment, I appreciate that there is an argument for grant-aided schools and I appreciate that there is an argument for abolishing grant-aided schools. But it worries me that, in passing the amendments, we could be changing something without being aware of it.

Am I raising just a silly fear? I honestly am not. I know that a paper put forward by Shoeburyness county high school, which was considered by Southend-on-Sea borough council, gave the impression that the new status of that school, which has a small selective intake, would change the whole arrangement. Does the Minister believe that, as a consequence of the amendments and the change in the classification of a school, Southend's educational system will be changed significantly? Will it mean that people who are willing to bring their children from all parts of Essex and further afield will have equal admission to those schools?

If we are to make such a change, the House should consider it in detail. It is not something which should slip through. I have raised this point not to hold up proceedings—I appreciate that we have many amendments to consider and I have no wish to detain the House on other amendments—but because I hate the situation that often arises in the House, when we make one change in something and create a rather dramatic consequence of which we were not aware.

In Southend-on-Sea, we appreciate not a change of policy by the Government, but the fact that the Government have kindly, despite what they said previously, indicated that where grammar school arrangements are acceptable to the local community, we should be allowed to keep them. We simply hope that it will be possible for our arrangements to continue. If, by chance, we cannot continue and the Greenwich judgment has to apply, will the Minister have power to do anything about the appeal to which he has referred? Will he be able to say to Southend that despite the judgment, it can carry on as before? I assure the Minister that the issue is of real significance and could have a serious impact on Southend borough council.

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

If, by chance, my fears are right, the impact on Southend unitary authority will be significant. It will have to make provision for many additional secondary school places. Children who at present go to our grammar schools will have to go to other schools, and there simply is not room. There will be an impact on areas, such as Rochford, round about the Southend area, although, at present, only a limited number of children from that area go to the Southend grammar schools. If the numbers were more substantial, there would be a dramatic impact on schools such as the King Edmund school and others in the area.

I hope that the Minister will consider the issue carefully. I appreciate that I have thrown it at him without giving him notice, and I apologise sincerely for that. If there are still difficulties, will the Minister simply look at the matter? The fundamental point is that I hope that he will not, in consequence of making one change, make other changes without being aware of them. Will the Minister assure me, first, that he will look at the issue carefully and, secondly, that if an appeal were made by Southend, he would have some power to do something about it? If he can do so, we shall be very grateful in Southend-on-Sea.

Mr. Byers: Although I disagree with the hon. Gentleman on a number of occasions, I know that he does not raise silly points, and that he makes representations and argues on issues that are relevant to the people of Southend. I take the points that he raises very seriously. I will, as he has requested, look again at the implications of the amendments for Southend. I assure him that if the amendments affect Southend—I am not sure that they do and I will write to him on the issue—and it is felt that an appeal is appropriate, not only do I guarantee that Southend will have the right to an appeal, but I shall be more than happy to meet him and representatives of Southend to hear at first hand their views and concerns as part of that appeal process.

I had in mind in relation to the amendments a number of other parts of the country and individual schools that might be affected, but I did not have schools in Southend in mind. I will revisit the matter to make sure that I was correct in my first view. I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman and let him know precisely whether the amendments cover the position in Southend. As I said, I think that they do not, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm that.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 20 and 21 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 22, in page 18, line 42, after first ("day"") insert

("(except in Part I of Schedule 31)")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 23 to 30, 32, 33, 37 to 39, 51, 91, 156, 161, 163, 167, 176, 190 to 193, 208, 233, 356, 357, 359, 360, 406 and 410.

Mr. Byers: I am tempted to go through each of the amendments in some detail, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but, you will be pleased to hear, I shall not. I notice that, on the Speaker's selection list, the amendments are referred to as "technical amendments"; in the brief from my civil servants that I read last night, they are referred to as "highly technical amendments" and I have to admit that they are.

I apologise to the House for the large number of amendments included in the group. They cover four main issues in respect of the new framework. First, they clarify various definitions contained within the Bill in matters such as "appointed day", "community or foundation school" and

"land held on trust for the purposes of the school".

Secondly, they ensure that rights and liabilities will transfer with property, which is wholly appropriate. Thirdly, having received advice from the Charity Commission, we have clarified the charitable status of schools. Fourthly, we have ensured that the necessary regulation-making powers are in place in relation to group foundations and the choice of category process.

It is appropriate that the House of Lords raised and dealt with these matters and I hope that the House can agree with the Lords in these highly technical amendments.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 23 to 33 agreed to.

Clause 23

SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEES

Lords amendment: No. 34, to leave out clause 23

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 35 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Lords amendments Nos. 36, 40 and 41, Lords amendment No. 198 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Government amendments (a) to (c) to words so restored, Lords amendment No. 199 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, Government amendment to words so restored, Lords amendments Nos. 200 to 207, 213 to 232 and 235.

Ms Morris: The whole issue of school organisation committees and adjudicators is one with which all hon. Members currently present in the Chamber are thoroughly familiar, as we have discussed it previously. Let me start by saying that there is general agreement that decisions on those important issues should be taken at local level wherever possible. We reached that agreement during our many discussions, so let us start from that point.

Nobody pretends that the present system, which we want to replace, is the best way in which to deal with the business in question, as many proposals for change to school organisation are currently considered here in Whitehall by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State currently takes decisions on all proposals relating to voluntary and grant-maintained schools, and on all local education authority proposals to which there have been objections; in addition, the Secretary of State may call in any LEA proposal for his own decision.

Local education authorities lose no powers under the arrangements that we want to put in place of existing arrangements. Local authorities will still be responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient school places in their area, and they will draft the important school organisation plan that must underpin all decisions about schools in the area. LEAs will retain their powers to publish proposals for all types of change to community schools and to decide any of their own proposals that do not attract objections. Where our proposals do introduce change is in the making of decisions on those proposals that local education authorities have never had the power to determine: proposals of their own that attract objections, and proposals made by voluntary schools and by foundation schools. Under our proposed arrangements, those decisions will be made jointly by all the partners in the local education service, with each having a direct voice in the decisions that are taken.

5.15 pm

We have to recognise that, even under the best of arrangements, there are bound to be occasions when the essential partners in the local education service cannot agree. That is why we propose the appointment of independent adjudicators. Adjudicators will consider cases in the light of principles set out in guidance from the Secretary of State and, as appropriate, will take into account the information in the school organisation plan. Judgments will be made on the relative merits of each case, and adjudicators will be required to set out reasons for their decisions in formal letters.

The focus of the new arrangements that we propose is that there should be local decision making. I believe that school organisation committees will reach decisions on the majority of proposals and that our objective will be achieved, but we have to make sure that there is a mechanism for resolution of organisation and admissions cases that cannot be decided locally. We see great strength in establishing an independent means of reaching such decisions. We greatly regret that the Lords did not accept the strength of those arguments, but, having considered what they said, it remains the Government's view that our proposed approach represents the way ahead for local decision making on changes to local organisations.

We have, of course, listened to other points made about the Bill's provisions by members of the House of Lords. The majority of other amendments in the group are a response to suggestions made by Members of the other place and by other organisations, to whose views we have continued to listen. In particular, the provisions for school organisation committees and adjudicators had been amended before they were removed by the Lords amendments, and, in inviting the house to disagree with the Lords amendments, I invite it to agree the changes that we had proposed before they were removed by the Lords amendments.

Those changes respond particularly to discussions with the Churches and suggestions made by the Equal Opportunities Commission. As a result of discussions with both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, we introduced amendments that make it clear on the face of the Bill that decisions by school organisation committees on school organisation plans and on proposals for change to school organisation must be unanimous. At the same time, we provided for it to be possible for unanimity to be reached within a school organisation committee even when one or more groups chose to abstain or were not present at the meeting.

The group includes amendments that make it clear that, when reaching decisions, school organisation committees and adjudicators must have regard to the duties placed on local authorities and on school governors by the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act 1976. That is an important safeguard to support equal opportunities and it is one which we had always intended should exist. We are happy to see it on the face of the Bill, so that there cannot be any shadow of doubt about whether it is intended.

During Committee stage in the House of Commons, we introduced amendments that established a clear timetable for consideration of proposals by school organisation committees. Those amendments give a proposer discretion to require the committee to refer a proposal to the adjudicator, if it has not come to a decision within a specified period. Members of both main Opposition parties expressed concern in Committee that there might be a loophole whereby proposals could be sat on so that when decisions were eventually made, there were no alternatives to choose from because so much time had elapsed.

The length of the specified period that we are introducing will be set out in regulations, but it might help the House if I say that we intend the limit to be about two months from the end of the objection period.

The special educational needs consortium made several suggestions, including some that will be covered in the discussions on other groups of amendments and one on education development plans to which we have already agreed tonight. On our proposals for school organisation, we have always made it clear that a school organisation committee will need to have access to appropriate SEN expertise, covering provision in special and mainstream schools. There are several ways of achieving that, so we propose to cover that in regulations. This group includes an amendment to make it clear that school organisation plans must refer explicitly to provision for pupils with special educational needs. There is no new intent, but there are new words that confirm that intention beyond any doubt.

The group also contains technical drafting amendments, all of which make helpful changes and improve the Bill. We disagree with Lords amendments Nos. 34, 35, 198 and 199, but we agree with Lords amendments Nos. 36, 40, 41, 201 to 207, 213 to 232 and 235.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I hope that I shall be able to persuade the House to disagree with the Minister in her request that we disagree with the House of Lords. Whether or not I am successful, I acknowledge that the Minister was right to say that a number of amendments have been made to the arrangements for school organisation committees and adjudicators which will be welcomed on both sides of the House. I hope that, if I cannot persuade the House to disagree with the Minister about the two key clauses, 23 and 24, hon. Members will nevertheless accept the amendments relating to the way in which adjudicators and school organisation committees should work.

[Mr. Don Foster]

The Minister was right to say that this issue has been aired at great length in the House and in another place. On 10 February, the Under-Secretary first uttered the immortal words that

"the current system is unacceptable. It does not work well and there is room for improvement . . . our underlying principle is that it is better if such decisions are taken at local level."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 10 February 1998; c. 367.]

She was right to say that there is total unanimity in the House on those words. The current system of school organisation arrangements having to be decided by the Secretary of State is simply unacceptable and does not work well. There is certainly room for improvement.

The Minister is right to say also that it is far better for decisions to be made at a local level. However, that does not mean that we have to accept the Government's proposals for making those decisions at a local level. I make my argument against those proposals on two key fronts: first, the bureaucracy that underlies them and, secondly, their democratic accountability.

On bureaucracy, the two clauses that the Lords want to delete propose an extremely lengthy and bureaucratic procedure. The local education authority would be required, in developing its school organisation plan, to hold a review on the issue and produce a consultation paper containing not one but several proposals. It would then have to hold public meetings and involve staff, parents, governors and other interested parties. It would then produce a report not only on its findings, but on the consultation process itself. It must consider the representations that it has received and decide on the appropriate action to take.

The LEA must then go through the whole process again and, having done all that, it must pass its final considerations to the school organisation committee, which will have to go through the whole procedure again. A unanimous decision must be made. If it is not, the issue will be taken on to the adjudicator, who will have to go through the whole process all over again. There is a potential for four tiers to come to a conclusion on the issue. That takes a great deal of time and involves a great deal of bureaucracy.

Will those decisions be made by people who are democratically accountable? They will not. Two days ago, in the debate in another place, Lord Pilkington of Oxenford, who waxed lyrical on this issue, was critical of local government and the way in which it sometimes makes decisions. He went on to point out that at least

"you can chuck the rascals out".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 17.]

The point about decision making at local level is that decisions should be made by people who are democratically accountable and who can, if the decisions do not please the local community, be chucked out of office.

I should have thought that on the crucial issues of school organisation arrangements, the Government would have thought it important that the decisions were made by a democratically accountable body. In the House, only 48 hours ago, the Secretary of State enunciated that principle when we were discussing Scottish tuition fees. His main argument against Opposition parties' proposals was that it was totally wrong for the decision to be made by an unelected Chamber—the House of Lords. He stated his principle in terms of the supremacy of the elected body over the unelected body.

If we do not accept the judgment made in the Lords, we shall allow to remain in the Bill a set of arrangements in which an unelected body will be allowed to make decisions that are vital to the education arrangements in a particular area. There will be nothing that people in the local community can do about those decisions, which will be final. They will have no redress—not even the ability to ensure that the adjudicator or the members of the school organisation committee are never allowed to make such decisions again.

For those reasons—our concerns about bureaucracy and the undemocratic nature of the arrangements—we hope that the House will agree with the Lords and delete clauses 23 and 24.

Mrs. May: Like the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), I sincerely hope that the House will not pass the Government's motion to disagree with the Lords amendments. The Lords have done a good service to democracy in removing clauses 23 and 24 from the Bill and in proposing that there should be different arrangements in determining the structure of the school organisation within any particular area.

We had a lengthy debate on this issue in Committee, and several amendments were tabled and rejected by the Government. Those amendments aimed to improve the arrangements that the Government are proposing. I shall rehearse our concerns about the proposals for the school organisation committee and, in particular, the role of the adjudicator. Decisions on school organisation are made primarily by the local education authority, which knows the area and its requirements. There are processes for public consultation. Councillors are elected and, in debates on school organisation, they are able to put the views of the electorate whom they represent.

The decision is then taken by another elected person, the Secretary of State. Throughout that process, elected Members of Parliament may make representations to the Secretary of State regarding proposals for school organisation in their areas and lead constituency delegations to meet the Secretary of State in order to make further representations about the proposed structure. Although many people recognise that the present arrangements have some inadequacies, the emphasis is currently on elected representatives taking decisions and making representations about the proposals at every stage of the procedure.

The Government make much of the need for local accountability. In introducing this group of amendments, the Minister referred to local decision making and local accountability. In a note under cover of the Minister that was produced on 18 February during the Standing Committee's deliberations, the Minister referred to the school organisation and admissions adjudicator. She stated:

"It is the Government's aim that decisions should be taken at local level reflecting agreement between the partners."

5.30 pm

I believe that we should agree with the Lords amendments and disagree with the Government on that issue because they propose taking decision making away

from the local level and from those who are accountable to the general public, and placing it ultimately in the hands of an adjudicator who will be appointed by the Secretary of State and who, by definition, will not be local.

On 10 February in Standing Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) moved an amendment to allocate an adjudicator to a specific area. In rejecting that amendment, the Minister replied:

"It would be better not to have locally based adjudicators because consistency will be produced throughout the country if adjudicators operate in several geographical areas."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 10 February 1998; c. 378.]

That comment appears to be contrary to the Minister's statement about the importance of local decision making. Adjudicator appointees will not know the local area. They will be appointed to cover several areas and will not have the local knowledge that is held by the local education authority, elected councillors, elected Members of Parliament and by those who live in the district and wish to make representations. The adjudicator will not be expected to take representations from local delegations.

The document issued by the Minister during the Standing Committee states:

"The Adjudicator will make an independent judgment on the relative merits of each case . . . We expect Adjudicators to consider most cases on paper."

That is what the Minister said: the adjudicator will look at the proposals that have been put forward.

Ms Estelle Morris: Would the hon. Lady care to refer back to the document from which she has quoted and complete paragraph 23? It states:

"Adjudicators may wish to receive oral representations."

Mrs. May: I am grateful for the Minister's intervention, but she is looking at a different paragraph. The document to which I refer makes no mention of adjudicators receiving oral representations. However, I note the Minister's point in reference to another document. If adjudicators will take oral representations, that is a step forward. However, it does not get past the fact that the adjudicator will not be a local, elected person. The adjudicator will be appointed by the Secretary of State; he or she will not be from the local area and will not be familiar with it. That point was made clear in our discussions in Standing Committee.

Before the decision reaches the adjudicator, it will have passed through the school organisation committee. As the hon. Member for Bath pointed out, the structure of the school organisation committee runs counter to the Government's comments about the need for local accountability and democratic accountability. The school organisation committee will comprise one representative from the local education authority, and its other members will be appointed. Unlike the local education authority, its members will not be elected representatives of the people in that area.

The committee's process will duplicate that of the local education authority. Under that process, elected representatives examine the school organisation structure in their area and reach decisions based on what they believe is right for that area, applying their local knowledge. If there are objections, the matter will go to a school organisation committee, which—apart from one member from the local education authority—will not comprise elected representatives. Its members will represent different groupings, some of which are identified in the Bill.

In introducing her objections to the Lords amendments, the Minister referred to differences in the proposed structure of voting within school organisation committees. I listened to the Minister carefully in case her comments changed my understanding of that situation. Judging from those proposals and the Minister's comments about them, decisions must be unanimous, but it does not matter whether groups are absent from the committee meeting when the vote is taken or whether representatives choose to abstain.

Let us say that there are six groupings and each has a single vote within the school organisation committee. If two groupings are not represented, two abstain and two vote in favour of a proposal, the decision is considered to be unanimous. I am sure that most people would contend that two votes out of six is far from a unanimous decision. Rather than improving the situation, I suggest that the Government's proposals generate more concern about the definition of unanimous voting within school organisation committees. According to the nature of the voting structure that will be put in place, some groups may be significantly affected. If they are absent from a meeting for perfectly valid reasons, decisions may be taken that affect them, but they will not be able to make representations and contribute to the debate.

In Standing Committee, we discussed the role of Members of Parliament in school organisation committee decisions. Several hon. Members argued strongly that, under the current system, they are able to lead local delegations to meet the Secretary of State before a final decision is taken if there is considerable disagreement about what is proposed. That opportunity for Members of Parliament to assist and to represent the views of their constituents in that way will be removed.

However, we were led to believe that the process would be different in one area of decision making. At the time of the countryside march, the Minister for School Standards announced that the process for rural schools would be different. Far from suggesting that the Secretary of State would not take the final decision regarding rural schools, the Minister's statement implied that the Secretary of State would remain the final arbiter of such decisions. That was welcomed at the time. Since then, the Secretary of State and the Minister for School Standards have refused to put that proposal in the Bill and to prove their good intentions.

It appears, from the way in which the Minister and the Government have chosen to handle that issue, that the statement was made with no intention of improving the process for decision taking on the potential closure of rural schools, and with no intention of helping to restore to the process rather more democracy and an opportunity for elected representatives to comment on that proposal, having recognised the genuine needs and concerns of rural communities. Far from that, the Minister was simply trying to make a statement on television before the countryside march, to try to take the sting out of the representations that were being made by the people who were marching through London.

Mr. Byers: I remind the hon. Lady that I have clarified the Government's position numerous times—

[Mr. Byers]

most recently, in an Adjournment debate last week. The position is that, until the new framework is in place, there is a presumption against closure of rural schools, which applies at this moment—as a result, some schools have been saved that would not have been saved under the Conservative Government—and that, when the new framework is adopted, the adjudicator will need to comply with guidance set by the Secretary of State.

That code of guidance will include the crystal clear presumption against closure of rural schools serving their communities. If an adjudicator fails to follow that code of guidance, remedies will be available to the aggrieved rural community.

Mrs. May: That was not what the Minister implied when he made his statement before the countryside march. The assumption by the people who took part in that countryside march and others, which was raised in the House, was that, far from it being a case of having "due regard"—a phrase which the Government love to use on numerous occasions as a way of getting out of agreeing to do something—to the issue of rural schools and an assumption against school closure, the decisions would still be taken by the Secretary of State, not by the adjudicator.

Decisions will be taken by an unelected person, in the shape and form of an adjudicator appointed by the Secretary of State—an adjudicator who does not know the local area, but whose decision will be final. That is what causes people concern. They are worried about the fact that, by these proposals, far from encouraging local decision taking, as the Under-Secretary straightforwardly said when she opened the debate, far from giving precedence to local decision taking, the Government are taking powers from local decision takers in the local education authority, removing from constituency Members of Parliament any role or ability to make representations to the Secretary of State, and placing the power in the hands of the unelected official called the adjudicator.

When the Lords debated the issue, they were especially concerned about the adjudicator's role. As a result, and because of their anxieties about the structure of the school organisation committee, they agreed that clauses 23 and 24 and schedules 4 and 5 should be removed from the Bill. The Government should listen more carefully to the message that the Lords have given them on that issue, because it shows genuine concern about the proposals.

The Minister mentioned discussions that the Government had held with both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church on the way in which the decisions would be taken. However, as I understand it, it is possible that the final decision on, for example, whether a Church school should remain open will now rest with the adjudicator. The Churches will not have a final say; the final decision as to whether a Church school will remain open or will close will remain in the hands of an unelected official, appointed by the Secretary of State, who is not from the local area and knows less about the local area than those who serve on the local education authority do.

The Lords got it right. I sincerely hope that the House will get it right tonight and support the Lords amendments. The Under-Secretary is trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the House when she talks constantly about local decision taking. The Government make constant references to local decision taking. Their proposals in the Bill remove power from local decision takers and place them in the hands of people who are not from the local area and are not aware of local issues.

For those reasons, I trust that the House will see the importance of retaining accountability by involving elected representatives in the process of determining school organisation, and of making it possible for local interests to be well served by retaining the essential powers of decision taking on those issues within the local education authority, and then within the democratically elected processes of reference up to the Secretary of State. I hope that the House will realise how important it is that decisions are taken, not by placemen on a school organisation committee, and not by the Secretary of State's placeman in the form of the adjudicator, but by those who know the local area, know the interests of the local area and wish decisions to be taken in the interests of that local area.

5.45 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am pleased to endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) in support of the House of Lords and the decisions that it has taken. It is not the only time during the Bill's passage that the Government have sought to remove powers from the local decision-taking process. The most worrying aspect of that is not the increased aggregation of powers to the Secretary of State, but the loss of accountability. Not only may an unelected placeman take critical decisions of importance for local education, but that person is not answerable through the electoral process to the local population, and will not be accountable for the decisions taken.

I can well understand why Ministers may lack confidence in some Labour-controlled local education authorities taking reasonable decisions on those matters, and I suspect that that is among the things that have driven their thinking in formulating the Bill's wording. However, they are effectively removing the opportunity for local people to judge those very LEAs for the bad decisions that they may take. It is vital that the local democratic process should be able to operate in that area, and it should operate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead said, in co-ordination with the activities and views of the local Member of Parliament.

Mr. Don Foster: So that it is clearly on the record, can the hon. Gentleman confirm that he is of the opinion that the decision-taking body regarding school organisational arrangements should be the democratically elected local education authority?

Mr. Brady: I think the important thing is that local communities should run their schools and their schools' affairs. I have long supported that principle. Of course there are instances when it can be effective for decisions to be taken at an even more local level—one instance being in the case of the successful grant-maintained schools, which I am sure that the hon. Gentleman had in mind when he asked the question. A critical point is that local parents—local people in their communities—should

decide how their schools are run, for the benefit of their children. They should have the critical say in how local schooling is organised.

Mr. Foster: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I apologise for interrupting twice, but he is now somewhat losing me in his argument. I was totally with him because he was arguing that the people who take those decisions should be democratically accountable bodies and organisations. The only such organisation that I know of that could take the decision is the LEA. The hon. Gentleman is now saying that parents should take the decision. I was not aware that it was possible to chuck parents out.

Mr. Brady: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that parents should be removed from their position on governing bodies of schools; perhaps he is now losing me in his argument. I am sure that it is a good one, but he may not be making it as well as he is accustomed to do.

We are witnessing a shift away from parents, away from local communities and away from elected politicians—local councillors and local Members of Parliament. The latter will lose the ability to represent the interests of the communities that they represent, and to represent the importance of those schools to them. That thread runs through the Bill. It gives the Secretary of State vastly increased powers over local schools and local education authorities. It will certainly have the effect of reducing the amount of local decision taking—the local input into the way in which schools and education are run.

The shift also has implications for the Church schools. The Bill has prompted the headmaster of a Roman Catholic school in my constituency to remark that the Bill would give the Secretary of State more powers over Roman Catholic schools than the trustees, the governors, the local diocese, the cardinal or even the Pope. The Roman Catholic community in my constituency is distinctly unhappy about that prospect, and is worried that the powers taken by the Secretary of State will result in a loss of choice to local communities.

Particular regard must be paid to the denominational schools and the rights of people representing those groups locally to have an input into the decision-making process. That is not to say that the Pope should not have an input, but the critical point is that the local Roman Catholic community feels that it is losing its say in the running of its schools, and fears that those schools will be less responsive to the community's needs.

The measure takes power away from local councils, the local Member of Parliament, local people and interested local groups. The adjudicator may have considerable powers and be answerable to no one except the Secretary of State. We are told that he will have powers in rural schools, but we hear little about how he will exercise his powers in relation to good, popular schools in suburban and urban areas.

In Standing Committee, I asked the Minister what consideration would be given in the school reorganisation and class sizes measures to the travel distance between schools. We await further details about what might be considered an unreasonable distance for a child to travel from one popular school to another in a suburban or urban area, and what travelling time would be considered reasonable, given that many of us represent congested areas where people may experience problems getting their children to and from school.

There is a related issue that will no doubt arise this evening in relation to amendments concerning grammar school ballots. If there is a ballot on the future of grammar schools and an area votes to end selection, considerable reorganisation of its education system will follow. There will not be same number of schools in an area that is currently selective and decides to go comprehensive.

In my constituency, I have eight secondary schools. It is a small area, and I find it hard to believe that, if it went comprehensive, we would still have eight secondary schools. Important decisions about school reorganisation would have to be taken, should that happen. It is a distressing prospect for the communities concerned that power would not be exercised through the local decision-making process or vested in those who are accountable to local people.

Ms Estelle Morris: The world seems to be turning upside down when Conservative spokespeople defend local authorities' right to make decisions on everything that comes before them, and the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats quotes the Lords in defence of democracy. If those are the best arguments that can be advanced, they have confirmed in my mind, if ever I needed confirmation, that the Government are right on the matter.

I took seriously the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) about bureaucracy. Inevitably, when any Government seek to build in checks, balances and procedures, and to ensure that the rights of the weak and of minorities are protected, one can make that sound like bureaucracy. I expect that I could make the existing system sound like a bureaucracy. When I advise the Secretary of State on school closures, there is a lengthy procedure involving objections, responses to local authority objections, local authority reflections on objections and so on. Similar comments could be made about that, but bureaucracy is not always bad. Sometimes structure and procedures exist to defend decisions.

I would never claim that what we are putting in place is not a bureaucracy. Whether it is more bureaucratic or less bureaucratic, and whether we agree or disagree about it, we shall not know until we see the system in practice.

The hon. Gentleman quoted my words at me. If we want local decision making, we must make some changes. If the Opposition do not support our motion to disagree with the Lords amendment, we shall be left with what we have, which every party is unhappy about. We cannot set up a new structure and a new system for schools and for decision making, and leave local authorities and others with the status quo. No proposal or amendment would result in a different outcome.

The choice before hon. Members tonight is to go along with the school organisation committee and the adjudicator, or to stay with what we have. Every hon. Member who has spoken has said that what we have is not good enough. We have sought to put in place a form of local decision making. It contains layers to ensure that we get the balance right and that the partners are protected.

The second point made by the hon. Member for Bath, which was also referred to by the hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and for Altrincham and Sale,

[Ms Estelle Morris]

West (Mr. Brady), is about who has the right to take decisions. We are trying to create true partnership in the education service. People other than locally elected members of councils have a right to be part of our education system and have a vested interest in it. They are governors, they run schools, they are teachers or head teachers, they are members of diocesan boards or they are parents. They have a right to express an opinion and take part in decisions about what happens to their schools.

It is not good enough to leave such important decisions to members of local councils, although they have a large part to play. By drawing up the school organisation plan against which all recommendations will be made, they will firmly entrench their role in the process. I repeat that they will retain the power to decide on their own proposals where there are no objections.

Our proposals for school organisation committees reflect what we have tried to do over the past 18 months—that is, to anchor into the committees the partnership we need to make our schools good. They will make decisions based on proper guidelines, plans and accurate statistics. Decisions will be made in the interests of local people, not sidestepped to Whitehall through the Secretary of State. The quality of decisions will be better, because they will reflect the wishes of local people and local circumstances. Partners in the education service will know that they have had their say.

The hon. Lady spoke about the position of the Churches and referred to a letter to *The Times* on 24 June from Mr. John Hall, the general secretary of the board of education of the Church of England. He stated:

"Such decisions will be taken by school organisation committees, on which the Churches will have a veto."

Assurances were given by my noble Friend Baroness Blackstone in another place that there will be guidelines from the Secretary of State to the adjudicators, which will make it clear that, where the relevant Church group on a school organisation committee has voted against closure of a denominational school, an adjudicator taking the final decision shall not reduce the proportion of denominational places within the authority. Such assurances in the House and in another place led the Bishop of Ripon to say on Third Reading:

"I believe that the structure and character of Church schools has been both preserved and enhanced."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 73.]

Not only the Churches, but the other partners in the education service are now taking their proper place as parties to decisions about the organisation of schools in their locality.

Mrs. May: This is an important issue. The Churches have expressed concern. I acknowledge that a statement was made about the existence of a Church veto, but perhaps the Minister could explain something to me. Will she confirm that, in the voting circumstances that I described, when the Church has a veto and the matter has gone to the adjudicator, that Church will have no veto over the closure of a particular school?

Ms Morris: As I have already made clear, if the Church section on the SOC votes against the proposal, it will go to the adjudicator, and the adjudicator will not be able to make a decision that reduces the proportion of denominational places. If the hon. Lady is not happy with that, I assure her that representatives of both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church are entirely happy.

6 pm

Mr. Brady: As the Minister will recall, I mentioned in Committee that St. Bede's college in the borough of Trafford—an independent Roman Catholic grammar school—draws pupils who are funded by the local education authority, and has done so since the war. Would the power of veto prevent the local authority from removing such funded denominational places, in an independent school?

Ms Morris: We are talking about decisions relating to the framework for maintained schools, not independent schools. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the whole issue of whether local authorities can buy places in the independent sector has been dealt with on numerous occasions. It appears in other parts of the Bill, and I will not go into it at this stage.

We have made it clear that our commitment to local decision making is backed up by a structure that will deliver exactly that. I hope that the House will join me in rejecting the Lords amendment.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 184.

Division No. 336] **[6.1 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim

Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel

Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Donald Gorrie and
Mr. Paul Keetch.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 35 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 36 to 41 agreed to.

Clause 35

GOVERNING BODIES

Lords amendment: No. 42, in page 31, line 22, at beginning insert

("Subject to section (*Grouping of community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and community special schools under a single governing body*),")

6.15 pm

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 43 to 49 and the Government motions to disagree.

Mr. Byers: It is important that each school should have its own governing body. It would be inappropriate to group school governing bodies as the Lords amendments propose. We do not want to stop governing bodies co-operating with each other. Many hon. Members have infant and junior schools in their constituencies that co-operate on joint matters. There is nothing to stop them co-operating on matters to do with site maintenance or school buildings, for example. We are not impeding such beneficial co-operation, which should take place between schools on the same site.

However, each school should have its own governing body because governing bodies have a particular responsibility for raising standards. We do not want them to be distracted from that task, and their lines of accountability should not be blurred. We are concerned that grouping governing bodies will blur the necessary accountability for raising standards. Each school should have its own governing body that is accountable for its standards.

Mrs. Browning: Will the Minister refresh my memory about the situation in education action zones? Do the Government's proposals not allow education action zones to do what the amendment asks? In an education action zone, a group of schools could decide to form a mutual governing body and disapply their individual governing bodies. The Minister claims to be serious about standards. Why would that affect standards in the maintained sector, but not in education action zones? Will he clarify his thinking on that matter?

Mr. Byers: The position in education action zones is different because of the overall powers that we intend to give the zones. It is not just a question of allowing governing bodies to cede their powers to the education action zone forum, which they can do if they want. The important point is that the governing body can decide to hand over all or some of its powers to the forum. That is different from individual schools having grouped governing bodies. The education action zone will have a range of other provisions to do with disapplying national agreements on teachers' pay and conditions or the national curriculum if that is felt appropriate.

The point of the action zone is to enable all the initiatives to come together. That will not be the case with the grouping of governing bodies. Most important, the education action zone forum will be responsible for laying

down the standards and targets to be achieved by schools in a zone. We are not comparing like with like. The grouping of school governing bodies is separate from the powers that we intend to give schools and governing bodies in education action zones.

It is true, though, that we intend to give new powers to governing bodies. It is because we are doing so, particularly in the raising of standards, that we feel that each school should have its own governing body. There will be a new duty on governors to run the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement. Governing bodies will need to set targets for their schools and agree them with the local education authority for inclusion in the education development plan. Obviously, a governing body will have to have due regard to the new code of practice that we want to be established between LEAs and individual schools. All those new responsibilities can be effectively discharged only if a single governing body is responsible for driving up standards in the way that we expect.

In addition, it is important that parents should have a greater say on school governing bodies, which is why we have provided for greater emphasis on and a greater role for parents in the new membership of governing bodies. Our concern is that grouping governing bodies will reduce the number, and therefore dilute the proportion, of parents serving on them. It is not in the interests of parents to group governing bodies as the House of Lords has suggested.

It is not just the Government who feel that it is appropriate to have a single governing body for each school. The National Association of Head Teachers, which I think most hon. Members would agree has a legitimate view to express on this item, fully supports the Government's proposals to reject the proposal to group governing bodies. It understands that, if one governing body is responsible for two schools and two head teachers, there would be confusion about which head teacher is responsible. The House should disagree with the Lords amendment in order to cut through that uncertainty and such blurred lines of accountability.

Governors have a key role to play in the standards agenda. That is why, for the first time this year, we have provided funds to enable governors to attend literacy training courses so that they know how teachers should be delivering the literacy strategy in primary schools when it starts in September. We also intend to ensure that, next year, when we launch the numeracy strategy, governors will be able to take part in training.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister clarify the type of circumstances in which he would envisage that the view of a single governing body on how to raise standards would be overridden by a local education authority?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman tries to take me down an avenue that is not incorporated in the amendments. Provided that it is in order, I shall try to address the issue to which he has referred.

In the context of the education development plan, a school and the LEA will have to agree targets. If there is disagreement, it will be registered in the plan and sent to the Secretary of State, who can then agree either with the school or with the LEA. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your indulgence in allowing me to reply to that intervention.

The Government take the view that it is important to have a single governing body for each school. Grouping governing bodies may be convenient for matters that can be dealt with in co-operation, such as those concerning buildings and premises and site management, but such matters are not key functions of a school governing body. The key task and role of a governing body at the present time must be to raise standards in the schools for which they have responsibility. That will occur only if each school has its own governing body. It is for those reasons that I ask the House to disagree with the Lords amendment.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I can scarcely claim to rise in the House as an expert. Anybody who knows me well appreciates that I am an expert in nothing whatever. However, I am an enthusiast for certain things, and one of them is individual success stories in my constituency—not least that of St. Alphege Church of England school.

While I have the opportunity of discussing the school, which provides nursery, infant and junior education, I should like to pay tribute to Mr. Brian Curran, the head teacher of the junior school, and to my very good friend Councillor Ron Herd, who has been the chairman of governors for a little while and a governor for some time longer. I also express my appreciation to Baroness Seccombe, who successfully moved the amendment in another place.

I pay tribute to the staff, parents and friends of St. Alphege school, and particularly to Mrs. Elaine Winterbottom, the headmistress of the infant school, who is shortly to retire after 25 years as headmistress. I crave your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to extend that tribute.

Mrs. Winterbottom trained as a nursery and infant school teacher at Kingston-upon-Hull training college, and taught at schools in Lancashire and Hull before moving to Solihull. She has been teaching for 30 years in the borough of Solihull, beginning with one year as a home tutor and three years at Ulverley infant school. Twenty-six years ago, she was appointed deputy head of St. Alphege Church of England junior and infant school, and one year later became head teacher of the infant school, when the junior school moved to its present site in Widney Manor road. Those 26 years were quite interesting, because, at material times, I was then a relatively new borough councillor in Solihull—as indeed was the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), who is not in his place; he is about his silent duties in connection with this debate.

The infant school rapidly expanded from three to six classes and opened one of the first purpose-built nursery units in the borough. As head of a Church school, it is not surprising that Elaine Winterbottom has been particularly involved in the standing advisory committee on religious education—SACRE. In 1989, she became a member of the Church of England committee on SACRE and was involved in writing the handbook for religious education in infant and junior schools. Under her leadership, St. Alphege infant school has developed strong links with parents, the community and the Church.

Parental involvement in the school has thrived with the formation of the Friends of St. Alphege Schools and the growth of parental support in the classroom. Regular events involve the wider community, such as the very

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popular songs of praise for local elderly people and the St. Alphege festival. Mrs. Winterbottom retires with the utmost good wishes and gratitude of the people of Solihull.

Turning to the merits of this debate—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hope that that graceless intervention by Labour Members does not signal any detraction from the tribute that I have paid.

St. Alphege is a Church of England aided school which has a single governing body. As far as we can tell, in one form or another, there have been sole administrators of the parish school since Elizabethan times—certainly since 1862. At various stages, there were separate schools for boys and girls, but on other dates they were amalgamated. In 1973, the original one-form entry site became too small for an expansion to two-form entry, and the junior department moved to another site half a mile away. The walk through parkland between the two sites is one of the most pleasant in Solihull. Through all those changes, one governing body has represented continuity and an attachment to St. Alphege parish church.

That governing body wishes to remain one single body, for what we consider to be one school—albeit on two sites, with two heads—for the following reasons. The first reason is to retain continuity, and the second is that any child given entry at the nursery stage is given the right of attendance through to the end of junior school; the admission rules are administered as for one school.

Thirdly, actions in the nursery and infant schools affect the junior school. For instance, because of the enormous parental pressure for entry to the school, and the need to accommodate classes of 30, the lower school is considering expanding to take a three-form entry. That means that the junior school will have to follow suit.

Fourthly, two school governing bodies, although one might contain the same foundation governors, would inevitably drift apart. Two bodies would increase administration difficulties and costs. St. Alphege is the school of one parish; we wish it to be administered as one.

Fifthly, the governors of an aided school are responsible for 15 per cent. of certain costs, and as a single body we administer moneys that we have accrued for that purpose. Sixthly, and not least, there is, I am happy to say, one parent-teacher "friends" organisation.

6.30 pm

Their Lordships, in their wisdom, were addressed on the matter by Lady Seccombe, and as we are now allowed to quote from the *Hansard* record of the proceedings of another place, I shall dip briefly into her speech. She reminded their Lordships:

"the school has been administered by a single governing body, probably since Elizabethan times . . . The school caters for infants and junior pupils and, because of its success, outgrew its site. It was therefore forced into locating the junior department to a site half a mile away. In reality it continues as one school on two sites. Continuity has been an essential ingredient throughout the years and its attachment to the parish church has been a much-valued focal point in the area. Further changes are possible as there is parental pressure for a three-form entry".

I am not surprised by that, because St. Alphege is one of the most successful schools in Solihull, which has many successful schools.

Baroness Seccombe continued:

"The chairman of the governors tells me that the board is deeply concerned about the Bill as it would disallow the way that it has organised the school for centuries. The governors fear that with two boards administration costs would escalate and there would be duplications in many areas. They also worry that there could be conflict and that the two boards would drift apart.

There are other matters which concern them. At present any child who enters at nursery stage is given the right of admission through to the end of junior school. Certain monies administered by the governors for capital projects at both schools are administered as one. They fear that they would have to set up a foundation to cater for such funds".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 July 1998; Vol. 591, c. 833-34.]

I appreciate the fact that you have been most indulgent to me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in allowing me to pay a tribute to a greatly respected lady from my constituency. You have also enabled me to talk in some detail about the schools group of St. Alphege. I shall finish by saying that St. Alphege school in Solihull has got it right, and their Lordships got it right too. Even now, the Government could get it right, and if they had the grace to reconsider, I would heap praises on their head.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): After today's performance, it would be interesting to hear a Conservative heaping praises on the Government's head. We wait to hear that. I do not wish to pay tribute to the lady that the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) mentioned, although it is good to hear tributes paid in the House to former colleagues and to teachers who have given their lives to education, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's tribute will be well received.

We support the way in which the Government are investing powers in governing bodies and giving them, together with heads, the ability to run schools efficiently and effectively, making decisions as locally and as swiftly as possible. Indeed, we do not think that the exception to the rule will be needed in many cases. It amazes us that on such a small detail the Government wish to force the issue and insist that every school have an individual governing body. I do not believe that that is necessary.

The vast majority of schools would want their own single governing body anyway, because they would want the special relationship with the parents and the community—and, indeed, with their local education authority representatives, when they turn up. To force that on everybody seems a little over the top, and goes against the thrust of the rest of the Government's policy, which is based on standards, not structures. Here we are told that the structures come first and the standards will follow later.

I must admit that in my time in teaching I have had only one experience of being on a joint governing body. When I first moved to Leeds, the high schools were all grouped together with a single governing body. That system was an utter disaster. All that happened was that, once a term, the home economics departments, as they were then called, vied with each other to provide the best tea for the governors. Little business was done, except that a report was presented. The whole thing was not only a sham but a shambles.

I am not arguing for the Lords amendment on the basis of having had any good personal experience of joint governing bodies. However, the hon. Member for Solihull

has given us an excellent example of a single governing body, operating for what are now two schools, working effectively.

Mrs. Browning: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on, may I declare an interest as the president of the Institute of Home Economics? I hope that, with his passing reference to the excellent teas that the home economics departments provided, he will not leave the House with the impression that those departments are somehow ancillary to the teaching in our schools. We need more home economics teachers, and a greater appreciation of their work.

Mr. Willis: When the hon. Lady left the Opposition Front Bench, it was a great loss to the House. Her intervention is most timely. It was a disgrace that the home economics departments should have had to make the tea for the governors. They had far more important things to do, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would accept that their job should have been in the home economics classrooms—but I digress, down the path along which the hon. Lady has led me.

Although I had a poor experience of a joint governing body, I can see occasions when it would be advantageous to have a single governing body overseeing a group of schools. The hon. Member for Solihull has given us an example of a junior school and an infant school with a long tradition, now on different sites but with a real sense of association.

There are many examples. For instance, many Church schools throughout the country have expanded, and are now faced with the same scenario as the hon. Member for Solihull described. Of course, there are also junior and infant schools on the same site that were built and intended to operate as separate schools, yet have come together to form a single governing body because that is the most effective and efficient way to run the organisation.

All that we are arguing for, and all that their Lordships were arguing for, is not to defeat the Government and create a crisis—heavens above, I hope that this does not become a constitutional crisis. We are simply saying that there are exceptions, and that it is important to allow flexibility.

In an earlier intervention, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) mentioned education action zones. She was right. The Minister will know that the Liberal Democrats supported the introduction of those zones. We feel that they have much to offer, provided that they are successful. A new way of looking at school organisation and bringing schools together with the business community is an exciting experiment, which we hope will work.

If it is a good idea to have a single governing body for a group of schools in an education action zone, it cannot be argued that it is not a good idea to have a junior and an infant school continuing with a single governing body on the same site. That is illogical. Furthermore, the Minister said that that would dilute the parental or community involvement. That is exactly what is happening with a single governing body in an education action zone, where sometimes there are as many as 20 schools. That may be a price worth paying in this brave new world of moving away from traditional structures. Clearly, that issue must be examined.

I wish to refer to beacon schools. On Monday, I went to the beacon school in my constituency, St. Aidan's—one of the finest schools I have ever had the good fortune to be involved with. I talked to the head, the staff and the governors about the other schools that the school will support, and it was exciting to see how the new system would work on the ground. However, it was clear then—it is clear again today—that there may be a requirement for those governing bodies to work together. It might be perceivable that it would be worth while to have a single governing body—particularly, as in this case, where one of the schools that St. Aidan's is going to work with is another Church school. I can see advantages in that. If we throw out the Lords amendment, we will cut off a route—that is all.

The vast majority of schools will want a single governing body, and that is right and proper. There will be few exceptions to that rule, but let us leave in the Bill an opportunity for that to happen.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I am privileged to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) who, to those of us who are junior Members of the House, gave an excellent example of how a Member of Parliament can show up a vital issue in his own constituency. It is a timely reminder of the vital link between Members of Parliament and our constituencies—one which we would be well advised to retain in the future.

The Education Select Committee recently commenced a study into head teachers. One of the ideas that we intended to look at was whether there could be one head teacher for a number of schools: the corollary of that would be one governing body for a number of schools. It is frankly perverse that the Government oppose the Lords amendment while Labour Members have actively toyed with the revolutionary concept—some are rather in favour of it—of one head for a number of schools. There are a few cases where that happens already. I believe that there are a cluster of schools in Dorset where one head has overall control. I am not aware of whether there is one governing body that might be affected by the changes that the Government are seeking to put back in the Bill.

The thrust of the Government's approach to the amendment is typical of their approach almost from day one of the Bill. It is the approach of a party that is hungry for power. Once it acquires that power, it becomes consumed with the determination to accrue as much of it as possible for the centre and for the Departments, and to take away as much discretion as possible from every other aspect of the education system—particularly from the local education authorities.

It should not be a matter for central Government whether a number of governing bodies that are responsible for more than one school exist in a particular education authority. That should not detain the House, but it does when the Government elevate it above its normal importance.

Recently, as part of the study into head teachers, the Education Select Committee visited Zurich. We were told by the canton of Zurich that, in Switzerland, there are 26 cantons, so there are 26 education systems. One can imagine the brainstorm that the Minister would have if he had to contemplate 26 different education systems in this country, yet for the people of Switzerland, that is par for

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the course—it is part of their way of life. Out of that flexibility, they have managed to develop a fine education system.

One of the features of the Swiss education system is that the country does not have schools at all—it has "school houses". The canton of Zurich does not, at present, have head teachers, but those concerned were talking about proposals to introduce them and to move towards the UK model, which was developed very much by the last Government. We asked how big the schools would be. We were told that that would depend on how many school houses they decided to include under the umbrella of one school.

6.45 pm

Clearly, a flexibility and imagination exist there that are totally lacking in the Department for Education and Employment, under the auspices of the Minister. We are on rigid tramlines in this country, where the idea that there might be some joint enterprise on two sites is dismissed out of hand, it would appear from the Minister's comments.

The other aspect of the Swiss system which illuminates this debate is that the local community is in charge of all the school houses. It would make far more sense if there were to be a local power to determine whether a governing body should have authority over a group of schools, rather than over just one. It would make far more sense if that decision were downstreamed to the local council or to the local parish council, where the needs of the particular area and the history of a school—as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull—could illuminate the decision to be made by local people who understood the circumstances.

Later this evening, we will have a debate about the partnership between the independent and private sectors, when we will hear just how little—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot talk about a future debate. I should say that Lords amendments are always narrow. He must address his remarks to the Lords amendment, and not to Switzerland or any other part of the world.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I am bound—without going beyond the thrust of the Lords amendment—to mention the research by the Committee into the school system in the United States, where there are also schools on more than one site run by a single governing body. The other day, we heard from—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow that. Lords amendments are even tighter than our own amendments. We cannot go wide of them. The hon. Gentleman must address his remarks to the Lords amendment. If he is finding difficulty, that is fine—he can sit down and let another hon. Member speak.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because, as always, your advice is both pertinent and brief. I shall certainly take it before too long.

When I was a local councillor in Paddington, one of the schools in my area was an amalgam of two secondary schools, and it had reinvented the American system of the lower high and upper high school. I heard from the headmaster the other day about how successful that has been for the two schools, and how much it has helped to develop the full potential of each pupil.

What would happen if a local education authority wanted, for sound local reasons, to run two schools as a lower and a higher secondary school, rather than in parallel, and, to make the scheme work, determined that it would make perfect sense for only one governing body to oversee the entire administration of the two sites? I should be grateful if the Minister clarified that issue before we vote on this important issue.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Given your advice to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be brief and address my remarks strictly to the amendment. When he was speaking, I was reminded of that old maxim that St. Aubyn's speech is to the amendments what London is to Paddington, which I hope was apposite given that Paddington was mentioned.

The Minister has made four points of false logic. The first concerns the Government's version of the classic dilemma between control and diversity. This lies at the heart of the amendments. They want central control to maintain coherent, consistent standards through what the Minister has called a single line of accountability in school governance, but that contradicts the desire for diversity and for a flexible system that respects local traditions and needs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) pointed out. He said that he spoke as an expert on nothing; if that were so—given his wide experience and expertise, which is so greatly admired by hon. Members on both sides of the House—I should hate to think where I count on a scale of expertise from one to 100.

The second point of false logic, which was drawn to our attention by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), is the contradiction between the policy on schools in education action zones and the policy on other schools. The Government are arguing that a single governing body should be responsible for one school but that the opposite should apply in education action zones, where one governing body will be answerable for several schools gathered together.

The third problem relates to the notion that the Government's proposals will create a simpler system. Several schools may have been closely knit or even seamless in their practical organisation for decades or even centuries, when they have been united by a single governing body. Under the Bill, those schools will have to create several governing bodies, so to argue that that is clearer and more straightforward is nonsense.

The fourth and most profound criticism of the proposals is that the Government are claiming that they want to simplify the system of accountability, despite the fact that, under the Bill, accountability will be shared among governing bodies, education action zones, local education authorities and the Secretary of State. The Bill will create several points of power and accountability, leaving the management of education in a state of confusion. If the

Government reject the amendments, they will cut across the thrust of the Bill; I believe that the House should support the flexibility that the amendments would allow.

Mrs. May: I commend the excellent speeches of my hon. Friends, especially that of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). I regret the fact that cackles of laughter greeted his tribute to St. Alphege school, as he was genuinely supporting a member of staff who has clearly contributed a great deal to the life of the local community.

Mr. Byers: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, as I want to put on the record the fact that the disagreement, which will be recorded in *Hansard*, had nothing whatever to do with Mrs. Winterbottom and the excellent service that she has given over many years to St. Alphege; the disagreement was about the amendment.

Mrs. May: That was not how it seemed at the time, although I am sure that we are all grateful to the Minister for clarifying the position.

The Government's attitude to the issue of single governing bodies was summed up in the Minister's response to the pertinent intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). She reminded him that, elsewhere in the Bill, the Government had accepted the concept of grouped governing bodies in the form of the education action forum in an education action zone. He tried valiantly to defend the Government's position by suggesting that there was a difference between governing bodies coming together in an education action forum and the grouped governing bodies that are the subject of the amendments but, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said, he failed to show that there were any real differences.

That betrayed the Government's attitude to the Lords amendments, which is plain mean. We are considering the amendments because the example of St. Alphege was raised in another place by Baroness Seccombe, who spoke eloquently of the excellent education provided in that school, which has a tradition of having a single governing body. That arrangement has worked well, resulting in a popular school that produces excellent results, and the governors and all those involved with the school want that tradition to continue. The Government, however, are saying, "No. We know best."

We have heard today about how the Government believe in the importance of local decision making. However, in the case of St. Alphege, although everyone in the local community is saying that the school should be allowed to continue to have a single governing body, the Minister is saying no.

Mr. Byers: I wonder whether the hon. Lady, as the Opposition spokesman, can answer this simple question: if grouped governing bodies are so important, why has not the House of Lords insisted that foundation schools be allowed to have them?

Mrs. May: In considering the issue, the House of Lords had very much in mind the example of the school that my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull mentioned. The Lords wanted to give such schools the opportunity to have single governing bodies. Is the Minister now suggesting that he is willing to take the matter further and allow all types of school to have grouped governing bodies?

Mr. Byers: The Government disagree with the principle of grouped governing bodies. As the hon. Lady has made a very strong case in favour of grouping governing bodies, will she explain why the amendments that she supports would not extend that advantage to foundation schools?

Mrs. May: If the Minister thinks that I have made a good case in favour of grouped governing bodies, he should join us in voting to agree to the Lords amendments.

The Government are being mean in trying to prevent schools such as St. Alphege from having a single governing body, although that arrangement has been shown to work extremely well. They have deployed two arguments against single governing bodies, both in another place and in the House of Commons. The first was that, in grouping governing bodies, one would have to reduce the number of parental representatives. We are all in favour of parents taking an active role in schools, and especially on governing bodies. The Conservative Government put a significant emphasis on parental choice and the role of parents in decision taking in their local schools. The issue of the number of governors from any particular grouping does not preclude the Government from accepting the concept of a single governing body.

Baroness Blackstone said:

"Governing bodies are there to promote higher standards and provide accountability for the school's performance. They should be looking at the strategic direction that the school should be taking."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 July 1998; Vol. 591, c. 835.]

That was given as a reason for not having a single governing body. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull said, and as Baroness Seccombe said in the other place, the need for strategic direction is precisely one of the reasons why the governing body of St. Alphege Church of England school wants to remain single. Its members believe that the school on two sites is more properly guided by a single body that can take into account issues of concern to both sites.

7 pm

The Government merely pretend to be interested in flexibility and local decision taking. I am very disappointed by what the Minister said, because the press announcements issued immediately after the Government's defeat in the Lords implied that they would reconsider. As we have seen all too often, when a microphone or press release is put in front of Ministers in the current Government, they say something entirely different from what they do in the Chamber.

The Government are being just plain mean. They should accept their own comments on flexibility and local decision taking, and allow governing bodies to decide that, where it works in local circumstances, local people should be allowed to have a single governing body.

Mr. Byers: This may become known as the St. Alphege group of amendments. As Minister for School Standards, I join the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) in offering congratulations and thanks to

[Mr. Byers]

Mrs. Winterbottom, who has given many years of loyal and devoted service. She is a credit to her profession, and I am sure that many thousands of children have benefited from her endeavours.

I assure the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) that we considered the consequences of the Lords amendment, and rejected it as wrong-headed and foolish. It fails to recognise the important role that school governors play in raising standards: not the old approach that governing bodies used to have, but the new approach outlined in the Bill, giving every governing body the responsibility to raise standards. The Bill introduces a range of new duties for governing bodies: to monitor the performance of head teachers; to respond to a warning notice from a local education authority; and to agree their aspect of the education development plan.

We believe that the lines of accountability will be blurred if there is not a single governing body for each single school. That is why we intend to resist the Lords amendment.

Mr. Hayes: Surely the Minister would not argue that the new responsibilities are greater than the extra responsibilities produced by the changes to the structure of governing bodies in 1986 or, indeed, the implications of local management of schools in 1988. Surely those were greater transfers of power to governing bodies, yet the situation as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) prevailed in those periods of change and worked very well.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman reveals the Conservative party's great weakness on education. The powers given to governing bodies under Conservative legislation were all about structure and did not give responsibility for standards. The Bill is about driving up standards, which is why we need a single governing body for each school. There can be co-operation where there is a tradition of it, and there can be joint working between individual governing bodies, but there is no doubt in the Government's mind that it is wholly appropriate that each school should have its own governing body. There should be no flexibility to fail, and under our proposals that will not be the case. Accordingly, I must ask the House to disagree with the Lords amendments.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 167.

Division No. 337] **[7.5 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen

Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David

Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Nigel Waterson and
Mr. Stephen Day.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 43 to 49 disagreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 50, in page 34, line 24, at end insert

(", and

(c) the aims and values of the school, and the ways in which the school intends to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils.")

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, we may consider the Government amendment thereto, Lords amendment No. 52 and the Government motion to disagree thereto.

Ms Morris: We take seriously schools' responsibilities for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Our motion to disagree with amendment No. 52, on which the Government were defeated in the other place, does not mean that we do not share the view that those are proper responsibilities for schools. We want schools to carry out those responsibilities as well as they can.

As well as disagreeing to amendment No. 52, we want to amend amendment No. 50, on which we were defeated in the other place. The Government originally resisted Baroness Young's amendments because they were too detailed and prescriptive a package. We did not dispute the content or her wish that schools should address the issues concerned. However, the amendments placed demands on schools. We have considered her comments carefully, and have examined her amendments. We offer a compromise that acknowledges the importance to parents of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development—matters which parents have a right to discuss. However, other significant concerns deserve equal treatment. We want to remove from governing bodies onerous requirements that run counter to our policy of lifting unnecessary burdens and reducing bureaucracy.

We propose to extend the list of items that parents are able to discuss under clause 42. Our proposal includes Baroness Young's intended issues, but the clause would go wider to cover pupils' entire educational experience including standards of achievement and the schools' contribution to their behaviour, discipline and general well-being. We want to signal that those are matters of importance to parents. We hope to encourage more parents to go to annual meetings that are often poorly attended. The list of matters to be discussed includes matters on which parents rightly take a view.

We propose to remove clause 43, which places extensive duties on governing bodies. That removes the requirement that governing bodies should maintain a statement of the aims of the school's secular curriculum. In sum, we are removing one amendment, but incorporating the provisions of the second into a wider amendment of our own. We value these matters highly. We have already announced that we have asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to consider that area for our review of the national curriculum for 2000, and to suggest how children's moral, cultural, spiritual and social development and work on citizenship can be more firmly placed within the curriculum and given the support it has lacked hitherto.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I agree with what Lady Young said about these important amendments when they gained substantial support in the other place after a wide-ranging debate. I welcome the Government's movement and their willingness to advance in a spirit of compromise. I welcome their acceptance of the importance of using annual meetings for a discussion between governors and parents of the aims and values of a school and how it will promote development of the whole child, including his or her spiritual and moral development.

In their compromise, the Government acknowledge that such development is closely linked to education for adult life and citizenship. However, a close reading of Lady Young's amendment and of the Government's amendment to it reveals little difference between them, unless it is that the Government want to water down Lady Young's proposal. I cannot believe that that is the case, and I hope that it is not.

The Minister for School Standards knows, following meetings with me in his office, that I am passionately interested in these matters. I have two children at a Church primary school, and the values of that school are important to its successful development and to propelling it to being one of the best in the country, irrespective of the fact that a large proportion of its pupils come from backgrounds in which they speak foreign languages.

Research shows that schools that are explicit and self-conscious about spiritual and moral development achieve higher educational standards than those that are not. Every recent Ofsted report tells us that the superiority of Church schools is noticeable in their effectiveness as communities, in their quality and in their spiritual life. It is clear that Church schools, which make a habit of promoting spiritual and moral development, do better not only in promoting those values, but in developing educational values, too. I am worried that the Government's focus on cognitive development—numeracy and literacy in particular—takes some emphasis away from spiritual and moral development of pupils. The Government will deny that, and will rightly argue that there should be a balance between educational skills and wider moral and spiritual values. We need them to acknowledge the importance of moral and spiritual values.

A school framework for moral, spiritual, social and cultural development, such as that being developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, is a significant and underrated means of increasing schools' effectiveness and raising standards. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is closely linked with both the espoused values and the lived values of their schools.

It would have been more consistent to retain the wording of Lady Young's amendment, and to add subsequent amendments to bring in citizenship, educational achievement and pupils' behaviour. We are

debating a narrow difference in wording, and I should like to know why Lady Young's amendment could not be left alone.

Mr. Willis: There is a difficulty with the means of assessing the whole business of moral development. Before the hon. Gentleman leaves that point, can he explain how spiritual, moral and social development would be assessed and monitored under Lady Young's amendment?

Mr. Leigh: I shall come to that later, because these matters were widely discussed in the other place. It is true that Ofsted found that this is a confused and difficult area. These are philosophical matters rather than simple skills, such as numeracy or literacy, which can be measured. The fact that there are difficulties should not prevent us from trying to promote moral and spiritual development. It is an important point. I may accept that what I propose is wrong and what the hon. Gentleman says is right. If so, we would have had a useful debate.

7.30 pm

The Secretary of State is simply trying to overturn Lords amendment No. 52. The other place suggests that there should be not only an annual meeting, where the way in which moral and spiritual development was being promoted by the school could be discussed, but an annual report. The Government's rejection of that proposal is short-sighted and wrong, or reactionary. It partly relates to what the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) was saying. The perceived difficulties with targets for monitoring spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and anxieties about teacher work load, may mean that this important matter will continue to be neglected by schools because there will be no requirement to mention it in their annual report.

Ofsted inspection reports show that the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and schools is a weak and confused area. That is surely all the more reason for schools to be encouraged to be explicit about developing policies, targets and means of assessment. The many examples of good practice and the lead given by the voluntary aided sector show that it is possible to develop specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related targets in this area, which the Government are developing through the QCA. The obvious connection between a school's vision and values and educational achievement make this an area that needs as much attention and resourcing as any other. We should not wait for the next tragedy, such as the recent murder of a headmaster in London, to stir us into giving consistent high priority to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of young people.

Literacy and numeracy can provide basic skills—personal, social, educational and citizenship—as part of the curriculum. That can provide a great deal, but they all need to cohere with an explicit whole-school framework that provides the why as distinct from the what and the how of education. In opposing the Lords amendment and thus seeking to wipe it off the Bill, the Government are emphasising the what and the how at the expense of the why. Those are not my words or concepts. They come from the QCA's draft guidance in November 1997 which stated:

"The promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development provides the 'why' (as opposed to the 'what' and the 'how') of education: it is an essential ingredient of school success."

I am worried that we will get loose talk based on Professor Barber's speech to the Secondary Heads Association. He highlighted the moral agenda in education, but believed that the ethic based on religion or communism should be replaced by one based on global citizenship. I do not agree. Being a citizen of the world is far too woolly a concept and does not provide the rigorous education that I believe in. That is my personal opinion. If other people want to promote that sort of ethic and tell our children that we are members of the global community, that is fair enough, but I think that things go much deeper. However, at least Professor Barber is trying to address the issues.

I want to deal briefly with the debate in the other place, because it is important that hon. Members appreciate that there was a high-quality, wide-ranging debate. Members in the other place, from a wide range of backgrounds, debated the matter raised by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough. The Lord Bishop of Ripon said:

"spiritual development, along with moral, social and cultural development, is not confined to schools but is a part of family and community life. Equally, these are not separate aspects of education to be placed in compartments. They are a dimension of all education."

The bishop said that moral and spiritual development is part of family life. There were interventions from atheists who said, "That's all very well. You may be religious, but we do not want to force religion down the throats of all our children." I accept that. Not all schools are Church schools, and children should not be forced to be little Christians or little anythings. However, they are entitled to as wide ranging an education as possible, and one that delves into areas other than strictly educational ones.

In reply to people such as Lord Dormand of Easington, who said that he was an atheist and could not see how we could simply promote religious values, there were several interesting interventions. Lord Dearing, who was not stressing the religious aspects of moral and spiritual education, said:

"I recall using phrases like 'to go beyond', and making it broader than spiritual values based on religion. We wanted to incorporate a sense of wonder; a sense of awe; beauty; respect for one's fellow human beings; and appreciation of courage, both physical and moral."

The Earl of Halsbury said:

"If the noble Lord, Lord Dormand requires a definition of 'spirituality', I can give him . . . one. If you wish to be a better person than you are, or if you feel ashamed of something which you have done, or admire beautiful music, or admire courage and courageous action in other people, or admire the way in which they attend to the sick and the invalid, and so on, that is a spiritual exercise. That is the only definition that one can give."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 June 1998; Vol. 590, c. 477-83.]

People have been talking about these matters for thousands of years. Xenophon asked a contemporary Persian educationist what the Persians taught children. He was told that they were taught to ride hard, shoot straight and speak the truth. That was what moral and spiritual

[Mr. Leigh]

education was all about in Persia some 2,000 years ago. We have a more up-to-date report in the QCA's recently published advice on the scope of such education. There is a strong case for recognising the central place of citizenship, personal, social and health education and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in the education of all young people by introducing more explicit provision into the statutory framework. That is all I am asking for.

Whether hon. Members have religious convictions or are atheists, we all believe that education goes far wider than simply instilling strictly educational requirements in children. All studies and all our experience tell us that, when schools try to involve the family and the local community in the wider discussion of moral and spiritual development, it creates successful schools. I am sure that the Government accept that. I believe that the Minister for School Standards, for whom I have much respect, is personally committed to such a concept. I hope that the Government's treatment of the Lords amendments does not water down the excellent work of the other place.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): I should like to clarify how Government amendment to Lords amendment No. 50 will be interpreted. I hope that it can be interpreted in such a way that the school's annual parents meetings could include discussion of the school as a collective rather than just individual pupils. The wording of the amendment is good on the various aspects of the development of individuals, but the school is a community and it exists within the wider community.

I hope that the phrase from the Lords amendment that the Government have retained—

"the aims and values of the school"—

will cover discussion of how the school operates as a community and matters such as how young people can help each other, how they can deal with bullying and how the school can make a contribution to the wider community. It would be helpful if the Minister could make it clear that such discussion, as well as discussion of how the school helps each pupil to develop, is part of what the Government intend.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): I wish to make a practical point about the amendments. I do not wish to go over the ground laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), but I agreed with every word he said—the House would do well to listen to him—and that includes his admiration for the Minister.

The substantive Government amendment is an improvement on the original Lords amendment. I thank the Minister and the Government for the amendment. I draw attention to the word "citizenship". One of the most important tasks that our schools are fitted and equipped to do is to help our children develop their sense of citizenship. We desperately need people to have a sense of citizenship if we are to engage them in the political process, apart from anything else. The House probably has a vested interest in agreeing with that.

As I understand it, in essence the Government's position on the amendments is that they are happy to have the issues discussed at meetings that parents will attend, but not to have them put in writing. Presumably, although the Lords amendment does not make it clear, it would be perfectly acceptable to put the expression of spiritual, moral, social and cultural values in the school's prospectus. I do not see that a new document would be required. The expression could be part of the current document to comply with the Lords amendment.

I have two conflicting views that I must express to the House. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough about the issues in the amendments, but I know that teachers are concerned that too much responsibility is dumped on them by the rest of society. They are asked to pick up the pieces of all sorts of problems that are the fault of bad parenting or whatever. I know that they feel that burden heavily, and we must think carefully before we accept the amendments.

I respect the Minister's desire to resist imposing additional burdens on schools. As I understand it, the motion to disagree with Lords amendment No. 52 is effectively a deregulatory measure; the Government are worried about the regulatory burden that the Lords amendment may impose. Obviously, Conservative Members have sympathy with that proposition, but it is incontestable that the best schools have the clearest view of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development that they should offer children. I suspect that they also have a clear view about preparing people for adult life and developing citizenship; that they want to boast about their educational achievements; and that the governing body is anxious to promote good behaviour and discipline. The best schools do those things already, and, as my hon. Friend said, they are often, but by no means always, denominational schools.

7.45 pm

We know that spiritual and moral development is easy when the leadership in a school is good. At my grammar school—a subject to which we may return later—such matters were very much at the forefront of the leadership of the school team. They flowed naturally into the ethos of the school. To have a debate about the issues at an annual meeting, or to put them in the prospectus, would have been easy for that school.

I heard the Minister say that including in annual school meetings the issues set out in the amendment would encourage attendance at those meetings. I wish that that were the case. Sadly, I suspect that schools that already have these matters best developed in their curriculum attract the best attendance at their annual meetings and are already prepared to discuss them, without legislation obliging them to do so. I fear that, even at those schools, one group will be debarred from such meetings. Working parents often find it difficult to juggle their conflicting responsibilities and get to meetings. I declare a personal interest, because the obligations imposed on me by the House mean that I can never attend meetings at my daughter's and my son's schools. The Government are behaving strangely in accepting and even going beyond the principle of Lady Young's amendment, but not daring to have it put in writing.

I have been reading the Department for Education and Employment's mission statement in the comprehensive spending review. I have done a rough count of the words and it is just a little over 200. Whatever one thinks of the rights and wrongs of the CSR or the educational policies, aims and objectives of the Government, the statement

expresses rather well what the Department wants to do. It explains the means by which the Department intends to fulfil its objectives, and sets out the Department's targets—all in 200 words.

I bet that the process of developing that written statement of the purpose was important within the Department. I bet that it focused minds clearly. That is what the process of discussion about the aims and objectives of the school will do in the governing body. Discussion has that purpose, too, but it also sends a signal to parents of children at the school or those who aspire to send their children to that school. That is important. Aspiring parents will not attend annual meetings; they will have only the prospectus and perhaps informal chats with the teaching staff to rely on.

I cannot understand the Government's opposition to a written statement. It would not take for ever to write 200 words. It would not be a huge regulatory burden. I should have thought that it would comply with the spirit of the Lords amendment. I see no earthly reason why the Government should resist it. The Government get two cheers for what they have done so far. They will get a third if they drop their opposition to a written statement.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said. For many years, I have been a governor of a school that has formulated just such a policy statement, which is in the prospectus and which the governing body reviews. There is no problem with it. The pupils of the school are a broad range of Anglican, Catholic, Muslim and many other religions, but the policy statement of the school is a Christian one. If parents are to have choice, they ought to know from the prospectus precisely the policy of the governing body on important matters that go beyond pure academic education to allow them to assess the schools for which they want to enter their children.

Given the supportive spirit of the Government, I cannot understand what objection they have to Lords amendment No. 52. The amendment does not say that the policy statement has to be Christian. It does not define what is wanted in a narrow way. It is surely part of the responsibility of the governing body, in reflecting its community, to focus on such matters. I ask the Government to reconsider whether they have any basis of opposition to Lords amendment No. 52. I should have thought that it was precisely what we should like to see operate in all our schools.

Mrs. May: I commend the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) and for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). They showed how serious we are about ensuring that schools take into account and promote the moral, spiritual, social and cultural development of their pupils. We place high importance on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire made well the point that the Government seem to be half doing one thing and not doing the other. It appears from their amendment to Lords amendment No. 50 that they have accepted that the moral, spiritual, social and cultural development of the school and the pupils is important, yet they will not go that bit further and say that the school shall be required to make a statement to that effect and provide that information in writing to parents. The Minister will have to work hard to explain why, having accepted the principle of the importance of those aspects of pupils' development within the school and of their educational life, the Government are not prepared to say why parents should be denied the opportunity to have it set out in a written statement or report.

We welcome the fact that the Government have accepted the need for moral and spiritual development and have been willing to go some way towards accepting the principle of the amendments moved in the other place by Lady Young. However, the noble Lady's amendments made it clear that the school should put those values in writing and ensure that parents had access to that document. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said, those who do not attend school annual general meetings of the governing body—we all know that the number of those who do attend tends to be small—need to have something in writing. That way, parents will know where the school stands on an important issue.

Ms Estelle Morris: I want to establish at the outset my belief that, for too long, the part of the curriculum that deals with moral, spiritual, social and cultural development has been ignored. I also want to emphasise the agreement in the House on this subject, because we are under an obligation to show leadership in this matter.

I should not like anyone who reads the debate to think that there is not strong agreement in the House that the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is an issue which schools ought to address. I know that there is a difference of opinion about how that should be done and about how far we should go, but it is right that we should give a clear lead and not allow anybody outside who does not think that that is an important role for schools to quote disagreement in the House as a reason for not taking action. I gather from the nods on the Opposition Benches opposite—it is difficult for anyone reading *Hansard* to detect nods of agreement—that we are broadly agreed on that point.

The Government have already taken action, and I shall go over the steps we have taken. We have ensured that the next review of the national curriculum will require schools to teach spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and citizenship. I was grateful for the comments of the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). It is one of the Secretary of State's main concerns that we should do better in training our young people to be active participants in their community and in democracy and politics when they grow up. In our first year, we have steered the review of the national curriculum in that direction. We have to remember that, when changes have been made and there is a proper framework for this part of the curriculum in schools, which is properly inspected by Ofsted, those will act as levers, mechanisms and messages to the school that the subject should be valued.

The problem is that, although the subject is the only part of the curriculum that appears in primary legislation—everything else in the national curriculum appears in secondary legislation—and so already has a place in English education law, it is ignored because of the lack of other forms of pressure on teachers and schools. All the additional levers that Governments can use—the review of the national curriculum, the work that

[Ms Estelle Morris]

Ofsted can do and the curriculum now being set down for initial teacher training—will add to the force of what the previous Government put in primary legislation and ensure that it is carried into practice.

I do not disagree with the Opposition on any of those points. The disagreement, if disagreement there is, surrounds how far we go in making demands on schools and governing bodies. There is a danger that, every time a Government think that something is important, they make their feelings clear by putting a responsibility on someone else to do something. There are times when that is right, but when the all those demands combine, the result is sometimes onerous responsibilities and demands on head teachers, governing bodies and teachers which do not allow them the flexibility they need to run schools. We are giving a clear message and ensuring that it is reflected in the curriculum, properly reported to parents in their child's end-of-term report, and properly inspected. Those are the levers that achieve our objective.

Let me explain why we disagree with Lords amendment No. 52. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) made a legitimate point about setting targets. For the area of the curriculum that we are discussing, and not for many other important areas, we want to set targets that

"describe what means of assessment will be used to monitor this development; and . . . report on the achievement or otherwise of those targets."

I accept the importance of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils as part of the curriculum, but I accept the importance of many other parts of the curriculum as well—the importance of physical education, music, drama, numeracy, physics and so on. If we set down in primary legislation the same demands on governing bodies for everything we thought important, we would create a straitjacket for schools, and they would spend their time abiding by the letter of the law, but not thinking about how to do their job and deliver the goods for children.

We desire not to weaken the overall message. If the hon. Member for Gainsborough wants to hear that assurance, I am happy to give it. However, like the other work that we are doing in the Department, the Bill is designed to rationalise the requirements on schools in primary legislation.

I know that the issue is close to the hon. Gentleman's heart, and I take it seriously. I know that he cherishes the subject and thinks that schools need to teach it and to teach it well, but that can be multiplied for almost every area of knowledge. We have to take into account whether schools and governing bodies can manage the requirements we impose.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts my assurance that it is better to set in place the other mechanisms that I have described, which have more to do with the normal day-to-day management of schools and will be incorporated better in the annual ebbs and flows of school activity, than to insist on a bolt-on extra that has to be done for reports and school meetings. We do not want someone cobbling together some sort of report when the annual meeting comes along. We want to get this part of the curriculum embedded in day-to-day life. It should be something that schools do because it is important and as natural as teaching literacy and numeracy. That is our aim, and that is why we choose to work via a review of the national curriculum, monitoring and reporting to parents.

I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's argument about the diversity that will always exist in people's ideas of what values and morals underpin their community. One of the things I have learnt since becoming a Member of Parliament and having had the opportunity to visit schools in my constituency and beyond is that there is a commonality of values in Church schools that holds the community and the school together. I attribute the success of many Church schools to those common values—that binding together by shared values is incredibly important. I want all school communities to feel that sense of belonging through having shared values; I want pupils to understand those values and abide by them because it is right to do so and wrong to disobey them.

We asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to produce a framework, which has already been produced, so that schools have a structure to adopt when drawing up their own values system. Such a structure is already available to Church schools—the values system is given in the religion followed by that school; but in non-Church schools the task can be more challenging. All schools need a system of common values. I should be happy to let the hon. Member for Gainsborough have a copy of the document on values now being piloted by the QCA. We hope that, by the time the review of the national curriculum takes place, the important aspect of the curriculum and of pupil development that we have been discussing will have become embedded in our school communities. I hope that the House accepts my assurances.

Lords amendment and Government amendment thereto agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 51 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 52 disagreed to.

Clause 45

DETERMINATION OF LEAs GENERAL SCHOOLS BUDGET AND AGGREGATED SCHOOLS BUDGET

Lords amendment: No. 53, in page 37, line 2, leave out (" "general") and insert (" "local")

8 pm

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 54 to 70, 146, 149, 158, 160, 165, 175, 180, 259, 260, 404, 405 and 407.

Mr. Byers: The amendments are grouped under the heading "Local management of schools", although they are narrowly drawn in the issues that they address, which relate to the delegation of budgets to individual schools. They fall into three broad categories. The first category of amendments relates to the names to be used in the new procedure that the Government want to adopt in delegating budgets to individual schools. They replace the general schools budget and the aggregated schools budget—most people could not understand what those terms meant, and the definitions and descriptions added to the confusion—with the local schools budget and the

individual schools budget. That makes the distinction between the local education authority's responsibility, which will be the local schools budget, and the element that will be devolved to schools, which will be the individual schools budget.

The second category of amendments reflects the debate in Committee and confirms that the financial arrangements will start in the new financial year—April 1990. I mean 1999; my numeracy is letting me down again.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Never mind, it will soon be the reshuffle.

Mr. Byers: I hope so.

The new framework will start in September 1999. The amendments will put in place the procedures that will be needed to cover the interval between April and September. They particularly reflect the concerns expressed by the grant-maintained schools sector about its position in the new arrangements.

The third category contains technical amendments. The important one allows local education authorities to reclaim value added tax. It will apply also to VAT paid by the grant-maintained sector and former grant-maintained schools, which already receive that benefit.

I hope that I have adequately explained the consequences of the Lords amendments, which make considerable sense. I ask the House to agree with the Lords in these amendments.

Mrs. May: I shall speak only briefly to the amendments, because, as the Minister has made clear, they partly reflect an earlier debate on this issue. They also put in place the technical changes for the local management of schools scheme, which the Government proposed in May in their "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" paper, by replacing the general schools budget and the aggregated schools budget with the local schools budget and the individual schools budget.

The Minister's explanation seemed to suggest that suddenly a light will shine and that changing the terminology will make the definitions extremely easy to understand. We know that reference has been made outside the Chamber to the wonderful new world in which schools will have 100 per cent. of their budgets delegated to them. In this last opportunity to consider this aspect of the Bill, it is important to put on record that the reality is far from the rhetoric. The names of the budgets will be changed, but far from schools having 100 per cent. of the budget delegated to them, they will receive 100 per cent. of what is left of the budget after the local education authority has top-sliced however much it wants to remove in certain categories.

Far from making matters simpler, there are four categories for which the local education authority will be able to retain blocks of expenditure: strategic management, access, LEA support for school improvement and special educational expenditure. Missing from the consultation document, which I fear will cause concern when the proposals are put into practice, are the definitions of those blocks of expenditure that the LEA will be able to retain before delegating the individual schools budget.

Mr. Hayes: My right hon. Friend speaks with great authority on these matters because of her background in local education authorities. The critical issue, and the point that she is seeking to make, is that there is a great difference between the potential schools budget and the amount that is devolved to schools. It would be more honest of the Government to publish those precise figures, so that people would know the potential amount and the amount that is actually devolved.

Mrs. May: My hon. Friend's point is absolutely right, although by referring to me as his right hon. Friend, he erroneously promoted me. It is important to enable people to know what amounts could have been delegated to the schools and what amounts are held back by the local education authority, so that they can make judgments about how the LEA is managing its education budget. I hope that the Minister will respond specifically to that point when he sums up.

I shall not go into the details of all the amendments in the group. I simply wanted to point out that far from all schools suddenly having a delegated budget that is much larger and gives them much more flexibility than before, the position will be exactly the same—the local education authority will be able to top-slice funds out of the overall education budget and determine the sum that will be delegated to schools.

We certainly welcome opportunities for schools to manage their own budgets. The previous Conservative Government introduced such measures. I have always been in favour of as much decision making and flexibility over budgets as possible being at local school level. However, the Government are not introducing such flexibility, but setting up, in the four blocks of expenditure that the LEAs can retain, categories that I fear LEAs will be able to manipulate to determine how much they will delegate to schools. The proposals will give LEAs the flexibility not to pass money down to schools if they so wish. That is a worrying proposal, and its real impact will be far from the Government's rhetoric.

Mr. Willis: I agree with the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) has a great deal of experience from her local government background. However, we get far too hung up on what percentage of budgets should be delegated to schools. The issue is the quality of service that schools and the local education authorities provide, and the resources that they each receive to enable them to do so. Before I spoke, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) reminded me that we want the LEAs and the schools each to receive 100 per cent. of their funding so that they can all carry out their allotted tasks.

I was intrigued, before I came to the debate, to read the Minister's letter of 9 February on the percentage of budgets delegated to schools by LEAs. I picked out two LEAs: North Yorkshire, which is the excellent LEA for my constituency, and Leeds, which was my LEA when I was a practising headteacher just over a year ago. Leeds delegated 93.9 per cent. of its budget and was one of the table's top seven or eight authorities. It is a very good, innovative, Labour-controlled local education authority and has decided to delegate services such as music and special needs education.

I then looked at North Yorkshire. That LEA is in the top five virtually every year in terms of GCSE, A-level and standard assessment tests results, truancy rates and

[Mr. Willis]

any other measure that one would care to name. However, it comes very low down the table, delegating only 90.5 per cent. of its budget in 1997–98. That is because it is a different sort of authority; it has a different organisation. The LEA has a large rural catchment area and many small rural primary schools that depend on it to provide services. It does so in agreement, not in competition, with those schools.

Baroness Blatch asked a question of the Secretary of State, which appeared in the House of Lords *Hansard* of 15 June 1998 at column 2161. In replying, Baroness Blackstone made it clear that consultation funding could create exactly the same problem. The hon. Member for Maidenhead has asked what services the LEA is expected to deliver and what budget it will receive, and what schools are expected to deliver and what their budgets will be. We do not want to spend a great deal of time arguing about the delegation issue. That argument has been won: it is acknowledged that schools require as much flexibility and as many resources delegated to them as possible. The whole House accepts that fundamental point.

Equally, LEAs have some important duties to perform and it is essential that we make their responsibilities clear as soon as possible. We must give them a clear budget that is open and transparent, and then we shall see which LEAs and schools deliver good services. I hope that the debate about delegation will then cease.

Mr. Byers: I shall reply briefly to this debate. I state at the outset that the whole purpose of the "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" document, on which we are consulting, is to provide opportunities and real choices to individual schools through the delegation of even greater sums to individual school level. We believe that the prime responsibility for raising standards rests with individual schools, and particularly in the relationship that is established between a teacher and a class of pupils. That is the reality of the situation. If we are to raise standards, a school-based initiative will be necessary.

That is why the "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" document seeks to devolve as much as possible to individual school level. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) is absolutely right: the consultation document refers to four areas remaining the responsibility of individual local education authorities—strategic management, access, school improvements and special educational provision. However, there is clarity in that.

On completion of the consultation exercise, we shall make clear what we expect will fall within those four categories. In that way, the confusion and the funding fog that currently exists in relation to the delegation of budgets will be lifted. Local education authorities will know—and people and schools will see—what they can retain at the centre and what they will be required to delegate to school level.

The Bill provides an additional power that did not exist previously under legislation introduced by the Conservatives: we will have the power to cap spending levels. If a local education authority abuses its position and holds back unfairly money that should go to individual schools, as a result of the measures in the Bill, we shall have the power to cap that LEA's spending in each of the four blocks referred to in the "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" consultation document.

We are sending a message to every local education authority: yes, LEAs need the resources to promote high standards in schools and we are giving them that welcome new duty. However, they cannot abuse that position by withholding more money than is necessary for the delivery of those four specific areas. That is how we shall push more money to school level, which will allow schools to raise standards and provide a higher quality of education.

8.15 pm

That consultation is continuing, and it would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome. In considering the responses that we have received, we shall seek to provide greater opportunities and choice for schools. They should have the choice to select local education authority provision when it is of good quality and is attractive to them. However, if a school decides that what is on offer is not appropriate, it should have the opportunity to look elsewhere. That is what we intend to do through our "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" document. The Lords amendment reinforces that point, and I invite the House to agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 54 to 70 agreed to.

Clause 59

STAFF AT FOUNDATION OR VOLUNTARY SCHOOL WITH RELIGIOUS CHARACTER

Lords amendment: No. 71, in page 46, line 33, leave out ("subsection (3)") and insert ("subsections (3) and (3A)")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 72, 73, 261 to 278, 353 and 389.

Mr. Byers: These amendments fall into a number of groups. Amendments in the first group are rather technical; they ensure that registration under the General Teaching Council is effective and that an individual can be removed from the register when he or she has been dismissed from a school.

The other group of amendments is particularly important as it reflects consultations that the Government have had with the Church education authorities—in particular, on head teacher appointments at voluntary-controlled and foundation schools with a religious character, the religious opinions of staff, the advisory rights of diocesan authorities on the staffing of schools in their area, head teacher appointments at Roman Catholic and religious order schools, and selection procedures involving the whole governing body at some voluntary-aided schools.

The aim of the amendments, which were carried in the House of Lords, respects but does not go beyond the 1944 settlement. The amendments basically roll forward

the historic agreement reached in 1944 between the then Government and the Church education authorities. We seek to do no more than was provided in the Education Act 1944 on the religious character and the staffing of schools. We use the opportunity to update and clarify some of the wording, and we ensure that existing powers in articles of government of certain classes of school are carried forward into the new framework.

The amendments recognise and meet the Churches' concerns about staffing. They reflect the Government's belief that Church schools make a valuable contribution to the education of our children, and our belief that it is right and proper that those schools should be allowed to carry safeguards into the new framework.

The amendments agreed in the House of Lords do precisely that. They ensure that there is a roll forward into the new framework which protects the interests of Church schools, and which allows them to retain their religious character and distinctive ethos. Church schools are popular with parents, and I believe that many hon. Members present tonight understand why.

The amendments reflect the important role that Church schools play. They protect and preserve their position in relation to staffing matters.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 72 to 84 agreed to.

Clause 66

DUTY TO SECURE DUE PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Lords amendment: No. 85, in page 51, line 35, leave out

("to be provided at the school")

and insert

(", or may be, required to be provided at the school in accordance with Schedule 19 (or, as the case may be, each such religion or religious denomination)")

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 86, 87, 154, 155, 157, 159, 162, 169 and 282 to 284.

Ms Morris: The Bill makes no substantive changes to the law on religious education and collective worship. By and large, the Bill is worded in such a way that it will be in order to apply the provisions of the existing law to the new school framework. Many of the amendments in the group are minor Government amendments.

I draw the attention of the House to what is probably the most significant amendment in the group, amendment No. 284. It was introduced in response to concern expressed by the Church of England, and I believe it to be non-contentious. It clarifies the statutory position on the nature of collective worship in foundation and voluntary schools with a religious character. The amendment confirms that worship in such schools, and in voluntary schools without a religious character, should be in accordance with any provisions in the trust deed, as is widely accepted and the current position.

However, the amendment then specifies that, for schools with a religious character which have no provision in their trust deed, the worship should be in accordance with the tenets and practices of the school's designated religion or denomination, as set out in the order required by clause 66. That brings the treatment of collective worship in schools into line with the treatment of religious education. I commend the amendments to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 86 and 87 agreed to.

Clause 71

TRANSFER OF LAND ON APPOINTED DAY

Lords amendment: No. 88, in page 55, line 35, after ("land") insert

("and certain rights and liabilities")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 89, 90, 92, 144, 148, 164, 194 to 197, 209 to 212, 234, 256 to 258, 285 to 326, 350, 352, 388 and 411.

Mr. Byers: This is another highly technical group of amendments. They concern the provision and disposal of school premises, a variety of different situations in which such provision and disposal might occur, and the respective rights and responsibilities of the interested parties. The amendments are detailed. I believe that they were agreed without great controversy in the House of Lords.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 89 to 91 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 92 agreed to [Special Entry].

Clause 78

MODIFICATION OF PROVISIONS MAKING GOVERNORS OF FOUNDATION OR VOLUNTARY SCHOOL EX OFFICIO TRUSTEES

Lords amendment: No. 93, in page 58, line 30, leave out

("and those appointed by the local education authority")

and insert—

("(b) those appointed by the local education authority, and

(c) any co-opted governor nominated by a minor authority.")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 147, 236, 241 to 243, 245 to 254, 361 and 392.

Mr. Byers: I get to move all the most exciting groups of amendments. This group is another largely technical one, this time concerned with matters related to school governance. The amendments cover, for example, provision for transitional arrangements, for reconstituting governing bodies to enable them to operate from an appointed day, transitional regulations to allow for certain governors to remain in post even when they do not comply with the requirements of the new definition,

[Mr. Byers]

and removing reference to instruments and articles of government contained in previous legislation. They were agreed without any great controversy in another place.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 79

CODE OF PRACTICE

Lords amendment: No. 94, in page 59, line 17, after ("(1)") insert—

("(a) make separate provision (by means of separate codes of practice) in relation to different functions under this Chapter of the bodies and persons mentioned in that subsection;

(b)")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 95 to 107, 109, 110, 328 to 330 and 333 to 349.

Mr. Byers: Once again, many of the amendments in the group are technical, but I bring to the attention of the House one major new provision, which goes beyond the purely technical and has potentially significant implications.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Bill contains a new provision for dealing locally with admissions. It sets up an adjudicator who will decide between admissions authorities if there is any conflict about the way in which admissions procedures locally are to work. That will operate under the new code of practice, which will be submitted to the House some time in the new calendar year for debate and approval.

As the Bill stood when it went to the House of Lords, the only body that could refer a matter to do with admissions to the adjudicator was an admissions authority. When we originally drew up the Bill, I thought that that would be sufficient to protect the interests, in particular, of parents in the local area. If the responsibility rested with an admissions authority, the views and needs of parents could be reflected.

However, as a result of consultation and representations made, it became clear that parents should be given some mechanism and some route whereby an admissions policy affecting them locally might be referred for consideration by the adjudicator. The Bill as it went to the House of Lords did not provide that opportunity for parents to refer a matter to the adjudicator for consideration. With hindsight, I must say that that was an omission. The Lords agreed with a Government amendment that provides the power to parents to refer the admissions policies as they apply locally to—

8.30 pm

Mrs. Browning: I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying, which sounds like a good addition to the Bill, but what will the mechanism be? Parents often have rights in legislation, but they are not always informed of their rights. If parents are to be given the right to refer an admissions decision to an adjudicator, can the Minister assure the House that, when the LEA or other body informs the parents of that admissions decision, it will be incumbent on that body to inform the parents in the same document of their right to appeal to an adjudicator, so that that information is fairly disseminated?

Mr. Byers: I am not unsympathetic to that approach, but I want to go away and consider the mechanics whereby we can ensure that parents locally are made aware of the new power that we intend to give them through these amendments. I am sympathetic to the hon. Lady's point, but I am not sure whether it should be the responsibility of the admissions authority or whether there may be some other way in which parents can be made aware of the new power. I shall go away and consider what might be the best way forward.

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. When people apply for a benefit or grant through the Benefits Agency and their application is turned down, it is usual for them to be informed at that time of their right of appeal and the mechanism and time scale involved. The formula that is already used by other Departments could be used by LEAs.

Mr. Byers: As the hon. Lady will know, it must be in the guidance on procedures for Ministers that we never agree automatically to something that is raised in debate, even though it may seem to have great merit. I have a great deal of sympathy with the overall approach of informing parents of their right. I want to reflect on whether the mechanism that the hon. Lady outlined would be the best. I shall give proper consideration to how we might make the information available to parents so that they can exercise a new right.

That is the main item of substance in this group of Lords amendments. The remainder are effectively technical amendments. I commend them to the House, including the amendment giving parents a new power to refer admissions policies to the adjudicator. I ask the House to agree with the Lords amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 95 to 110 agreed to.

Clause 96

PERMITTED SELECTION: PUPIL BANDING

Lords amendment: No. 111, in page 73, line 22, leave out ("approved or otherwise determined") and insert

("have fallen to be implemented")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 112 to 114.

Mr. Byers: There will probably be great interest in this group of technical amendments, which is headed "Partial selection" in the marshalled amendments before the House.

Amendment No. 111 simplifies the reference to the way in which proposals under schedule 6 may fall to be implemented. The amendments to clause 97 and 98 make

it clear that, unless otherwise specified, the provisions in clauses 84 and 85 will apply to any selective admissions arrangements permitted under clauses 94 to 97. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House will know precisely what those clauses contain, so I am confident that they will agree with me that we should agree with the Lords in the amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 112 to 114 agreed to.

Clause 99

DESIGNATION OF GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

Lords amendment: No. 115, in page 74, line 41, leave out (", 101 and") and insert ("to")

Mr. Byers: That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 116 to 128 and 374.

Mr. Byers: The amendments fall into three broad categories. Amendments Nos. 115, 117, 122 to 124 and 374 are technical and tidying-up amendments.

Two groups of amendments have greater substance. Amendments Nos. 116, 118 to 120, 125, 126 and 128 would give effect to the recommendations that were made by the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the House of Lords. That Committee recommended that certain measures should be written into the Bill.

The parents who will be eligible to a vote in a petition or to take part in a ballot and the fact that there should be 20 per cent. or more of eligible parents at the relevant school signing a petition were matters that the Committee thought should be recorded in the Bill. The amendments meet the Committee's recommendations. We were pleased to be able to agree with those recommendations.

The second significant group consists of amendments Nos. 121 and 127. Those relate to what are known as the gagging provisions in the Bill. Hon. Members who served on the Standing Committee will know that the Government were concerned that local education authorities and school governing bodies might abuse their positions, particularly in relation to the use of public money, in arguing for or against one side of the argument in relation to the retention of selective schools.

In Committee, the Government stuck to their original view, which was that it would be far better to impose a blanket ban on governing bodies and local education authorities embarking on any campaigning issue. A number of hon. Members who are present this evening, including me, engaged in a heated debate about whether that was the right way in which to proceed. As always, the Government proved to be a listening Government. I believe that the Leader of the Opposition began his listening tour yesterday, and I wish him well; but this Government have been listening for a long time. As a result of their listening, they felt that this part of the Bill should be changed.

Opposition Members asked why governing bodies should be restricted. If governing bodies felt strongly about an issue, should they not be allowed to articulate their view? Some of my hon. Friends feel that local education authorities should be able to articulate particular views as well. The Government have decided—and their decision is reflected in the Lords amendments—that it is appropriate for local education authorities, and school governing bodies, to be able to express their views on important issues. However, we continue to claim that they should not be allowed to use public money to pursue a partial argument. That is where we draw the line.

If a school governing body holds a fete or summer fair to raise money to argue for the retention of the grammar school system, that is perfectly right and proper; if a local education authority seeks to raise money, it will probably be in difficulties. I am not sure that such action is within LEAs' powers. No doubt, in due course, there will be interesting legal arguments about whether it would be ultra vires. In any event, it would not be possible to stop an elected member of a local authority from campaigning openly in favour of a specific argument; but we are drawing a line in the sand in regard to the use of public money.

The Lords amendments permit public bodies—grammar school governing bodies, secondary modern school governing bodies and local education authorities, if they wish—to argue their case. We do not wish to restrict their activities in that regard; what we are saying is that they should not be able to use public money to support their campaigns.

I think that the amendments strike the right balance between the two competing arguments. Having considered the issue, I recommend that the House agree with the House of Lords.

Mr. Green: As reshuffle fever grips the Government Benches, we should all be aware that each occasion on which we are privileged to hear the Minister speak on the Bill may be the last time that we hear him speak from the Front Bench. Let me begin by thanking him for the small mercy of the slight move that he has made on the gagging provisions. I am relieved to discover that the Government have not yet got into the mode of trying to dictate what school fetes should raise money for, although it must be said that that is only a small step forward.

The Lords amendments relate to one of the more distasteful parts of the Bill—and, as evidenced by the number of amendments that the Government have been forced to table in the House of Lords, one of the more intrinsically incoherent parts. The plethora of amendments to this part of the Bill demonstrates the difficulty of turning blind prejudice into good legislation. The Minister referred to the view of the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Select Committee that more details of the ballot should be included in the Bill, and that less should be left in regulations. The Committee is right, of course, and we should be grateful for the moves that have been made; but I hope that the Minister will explain what coherent principles he is using to decide what should be in the Bill and what should be left in regulations.

That question is particularly important in this context. Apart from the over-arching point about the House's ability to scrutinise legislation properly, there is the question of the time scale. Given the point at which the consultation period will end, we assume that the regulations will be published in the recess. I hope that the Minister will cast some light on that.

I know that several of my hon. Friends have specific constituency points to make, so I shall be fairly brief. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will know that

[Mr. Green]

parents throughout the country are worried about the clauses to which the amendments refer, and in many respects they are right to feel betrayed.

Any number of quotes from the current Prime Minister before the election illustrate the point. During the by-election campaign in Wirral, South, he said:

"A Labour Government will not close your grammar schools. That is my personal guarantee."

Parents of children in grammar schools throughout the country will know how much that guarantee is worth when they see the Bill. Even more strongly, he said in Birmingham in April 1997:

"Our task is not to change anything that works or any good school that is doing well. Our challenge is to change what is not working in the education system."

The amendments are designed to make it easy to change something that is working well in the education system, so they are unnecessary and damaging.

The amendments show how difficult it has been for the Government to enforce the betrayals that the Prime Minister is inflicting on those parents. Amendment No. 126 refers to parents eligible to vote. I was fascinated to receive a written answer confirming what I had suspected—that each child can have an unlimited number of parents eligible to petition and vote. That shows the arcane lengths to which the Bill going. One might naturally think that any child could have a maximum of two parents.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government have simply rolled forward the definition of eligible parents contained in the Conservatives' legislation on grant-maintained school ballots and petitions. That is the definition that has traditionally been used.

8.45 pm

Mr. Green: That had to be on a narrower basis, because it affected parents at individual schools rather than across local education authorities. I do not remember the Labour party welcoming those ballots, so I am not sure that the Minister's argument washes.

Many people will find the 20 per cent. rule peculiar. The Government have decided that, when they are dealing with matters that they care about, such as trade unions, 40 per cent. should be the appropriate hurdle. For schools, which they do not care about, they have decided that 20 per cent. should be the appropriate hurdle. Parents across the country will observe the difference and note where the Government's real interests lie.

The Minister will be aware that various local Labour parties are trying to organise campaigns against grammar schools. He told the Social Market Foundation on 1 July this year:

"One of our priorities over the next few months is to identify new ways in which excellent schools can simply be allowed to get on with what they do well without undue distraction."

I commend those words. The Minister is right and he should put his words into action by encouraging his hon. Friends and many Labour councillors throughout the country not to try to cause undue distractions to good schools by campaigning for their destruction.

The amendments say nothing about the cost of the ballots. Ministers refuse to answer the question when they are asked. One assumes that many thousands of pounds will be spent. I am sure that the House would be grateful to hear any figures that the Minister has. Whatever the cost, it is inconceivable that the money available for education is best used by spending it on ballots.

The wasted money is bad enough, but that is not all that will be diverted from better purposes. A great deal of energy will also be expended. I have two excellent grammar schools in my constituency—Highworth school for girls and Norton Knatchbull school for boys. They are already having to look over their shoulders at what may be coming. Inevitably, the energy of senior staff, other staff and those parents who are most involved is being distracted from their normal work of helping the schools towards thinking about what is likely to happen in the ballots. The net result of that uncertainty will be a reduction in the amount of creative time and energy devoted to improving the education of children. I cannot believe that the Minister thinks such ballots are a sensible use of time.

Mr. Brady: Would my hon. Friend care to reflect on the effect that the uncertainty is having on parents who are contemplating the best schools for their children? The proposals are already having the perverse effect of pushing parents towards independent schools rather than excellent grammar and secondary schools which they might otherwise choose.

Mr. Green: My hon. Friend, who has considerable expertise, makes an extremely good point. I cannot believe that it is one of the Government's intentions to drive more children into the independent sector. They must know that that is one of the possible effects of the policy. Although we on the Opposition Benches have no problem with that, because we believe in parental choice, ideologically the Government are shooting themselves in the foot.

Amendment No. 115 refers to clause 99, which states that a grammar school is a school that selects

"all (or substantially all) of its pupils . . . by reference to general ability".

It is interesting that, although the Government have quite sensibly taken up the previous Government's idea that schools should be allowed to select certain skills—a percentage of pupils can be selected for sporting or artistic ability—they are still hostile to the idea of selection on academic ability. As the Minister will know, there are those who argue that part of the problem faced by sports and arts colleges is that they are not allowed greater specialism and a higher percentage of selection. Had grammar schools not provided a good service for centuries, it would have been typical of the new Labour Government—indeed, I commend the idea to the Minister—to suggest that specialist academic colleges would be a good idea, too. The proposed policy does not even fit their own purported ideology. Trying to damage grammar schools in such a way is atavistic, and unworthy of many of the other things that the Minister is trying to achieve.

Mrs. Browning: Are we not debating the fact that the Government and the Minister are philosophically opposed to education by selection—they have made that very

clear—but realise that it would be extremely unpopular among parents whose children attend grammar schools or live in an area where they hope that their children will attend one? They have contrived a balloting system, and the Minister has made an announcement about not using public money, which is right and proper.

Having set a policy of hostility towards grammar schools, despite their excellence, particularly in academic subjects, the Government are standing back, wringing their hands saying, "It's nothing to do with us, guv." In practice, the trade unions will be the ones who find the money to drive anti-grammar school campaigns. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) laughs; he has good reason to do so. He knows that, in every ballot on an application for a grant-maintained school, he and his chums from the trade unions found the wherewithal and the ability to run a no campaign. The Minister knows that; the Government know it. They will let the trade unions do their dirty work for them.

Mr. Green: My hon. Friend is right. The Government are trying to hide behind others in the campaign because they put out so much soft soap before the election, saying that good schools would not be threatened. We said that they would be, and we have been proved right. Everything that was said before the election, by everyone from the Prime Minister downwards, is proved to have been a deceit on the public.

We have spoken of the chaos that will be caused by the ballot process, and is already being caused by the uncertainty. However, much more chaos and expense will, of course, be caused by the consequence of any changes. One key point that the House and people outside will need to realise is that the chaos, the expense and the disruption of children's vital years in education will not be confined to the grammar schools but will spread to all the schools in the areas concerned.

I have in different parts of my constituency both extremely good grammar schools and excellent comprehensive schools. The disruption caused by any change to the grammar schools would affect schools right across the board. Damage would be caused to the education of the many, not the few.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about disruption, and of course it will last longer than the duration of the ballots. Relationships will be strained in perpetuity. Imagine the situation during a ballot, with school against school, parent against parent and community against community—hardly a policy to bind together communities and local areas. The disruption will go on in perpetuity and damage the education opportunities of countless children.

Mr. Green *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, may I observe that we are straying rather wide of the amendments before us. Will he return to them, please?

Mr. Green: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The amendments are problematic because, at the margins of the Government's policy, the category of people affected is wider than existing parents and pupils. The amendments deal with the question of who is eligible to vote in the ballots, and the Government are having that difficulty precisely because it is not only the children, parents and governors from the grammar schools who will be affected but, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) pointed out, the whole community.

That is one reason why the Government have had such difficulty and have had to bring before the House amendments made in another place. It is regrettable that they are betraying their pre-election promises by introducing those clauses and the amendments to them, because putting good schools under threat is no way to raise standards in all schools. At best, the Government are causing short-term disruption and, at worst, they are engaging in long-term vandalism. However, I am sure that, if and when ballots take place, parents will show more common sense than Ministers have.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I support the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), our Front-Bench spokesman. First, I must declare an interest, in that both my daughters attended the excellent South Wilts grammar school for girls in Salisbury. I put on record the thanks of my wife and myself, as well as those of our children, for that superb education, which was both academic and rounded, and included an education through the community in south Wiltshire. They started in the village school, they progressed to Wilton middle school, and they have both now gone to university.

I wish also to put on record my thanks to the Minister of State for the courteous way in which he received a delegation that I brought to see him earlier in the year, which included the heads of South Wilts grammar school for girls and of Bishop Wordsworth's school, together with their respective chairmen of governors.

The Minister received us with courtesy, and indeed with spirit. He was challenging in the way in which he listened to our arguments, and then suggested that there might be even better ways in which we could raise educational standards in my ancient cathedral city and the other part of south Wiltshire that I represent. We came away most encouraged, in the knowledge that the Minister and his officials had listened carefully, and we hoped that we had influenced some of the decisions that he would take—although we were a little disappointed in that respect.

On many occasions over many years, I have made my views clear on behalf of my constituents, and that was but the latest occasion on which I did so. I might not have tried to catch your eye this evening, Mr. Deputy Speaker, had it not been for the bizarre remarks by Baroness Blackstone when the Bill was considered in another place. She said:

"this amendment appears to be about fairness and democracy, but I have a suspicion that it is about tailoring the electorate in order to achieve a particular result."

If ever logic were stood on its head by anyone, it was by the noble Baroness. She added that a feeder school was

"defined as a school which has sent five or more pupils in total to the relevant grammar school or schools over the previous three years. That definition was arrived at after consultation with a number of grammar schools."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 54.]

[Mr. Robert Key]

I bet that all those schools asked her to do exactly the opposite of what the Government propose.

While the Bill is making progress—thanks to the enormous majority that we face—the local Labour party in Salisbury is going around stirring up apathy in a community where education is regarded as an important piece of our social fabric; where the old warfare between comprehensive and grammar schools was, fortunately, ended 15 years ago; where education is so important that, in considering reorganisation to meet the needs of modern Britain, the secondary modern schools are proposing a sixth form; where the comprehensive school has excellent academic results; and where the grammar schools are part of a wide and varied educational fabric.

The clauses and the amendments are crucial to the argument. I am disappointed that the Government have not listened to the representations, and seem to be intent on fighting a thoroughly old-fashioned class war, concerned with the battles of so many years ago. It is in sorrow rather than anger that I have made my few remarks in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Minister will have second thoughts.

9 pm

Mr. Brady: Ministers know that I have a strong interest in the future of the remaining grammar schools, and of the secondary moderns which are their companions. Ministers have doubtless followed my comments on previous occasions.

I am delighted to follow my hon. Friends the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) and for Salisbury (Mr. Key). It is characteristic of these debates that people speak up for some of the best schools in the country. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford stressed that we are not talking about the grammar schools being the best. We stand to lose a system that is working in both the grammar and the secondary modern schools.

Last week, the Minister underlined that point for my constituents and the people of Trafford by including the Ashton-on-Mersey school in his list of beacon schools. That is a most helpful gesture by the Government, which underlined to my constituents the fact that Ministers share my view that it is nothing but arrant nonsense to suggest that those who do not go to the grammar schools are consigned to failure at 11. They clearly are not—they are consigned to beacon schools.

Last night, I had the privilege of presenting awards at another secondary modern school in my constituency, the New Wellington school. It is achieving magnificent results—often better than many comprehensive schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford made the telling point that that was the kind of initiative that the Government might have come up with had they not been wedded to a rather old-fashioned hostility towards grammar schools. In the north of Trafford, we have good grammar schools in Stretford and Urmston, which are doing the job of raising the academic standards of all schools—as will the beacon schools, I hope.

The Minister referred to the origin of many of the amendments lying with the House of Lords Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation. The Committee was right to return to many of the arguments of Conservative members of the Standing Committee—that the Bill was too vague, left too much to discretion and subsequent regulation by Ministers, and contained insufficient detail and information for parents and others with an interest.

The Minister talked about the technical amendments, and amendments that are required to put a little more in the Bill. Some of them are welcome as far as they go. I certainly welcome the slight relaxation in the gagging provisions. That will be welcome to the governing bodies of schools in my constituency, many of which have been very concerned about the interpretation of the limitations placed on them by the Bill.

The Minister rightly accepted that even this Government could not prevent people who happened to be school governors from expressing their views; those people would probably have published their views anyway with "governor of" in parenthesis after their names. He has accepted that the restriction would have been unreasonable and unnecessary.

I welcome the fact that no public money can be spent on campaigning, either by the schools or by local education authorities. I particularly welcome the relaxation of the gagging order on LEAs, as I want local Labour parties and councillors to be able to demonstrate their hostility to these excellent schools as openly as possible. It is regrettable that the Government have tried to wash their hands of the implications of their proposals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said.

Mr. Green: I assure my hon. Friend that, certainly in Kent, where some Labour Members are very publicly opposing the grammar schools in their constituencies, parents will not fail to let it be known who is leading the campaign and what effect it will have.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful for that intelligence on what is happening in the south-east.

In Trafford, Labour councillors have been more reticent about stating their views, in the knowledge that, certainly for nearly all my life, local elections there have frequently turned on the question of the future of the grammar schools. Labour won control of the council only in 1995, when it came up with a new local formula; it said that it would do nothing to harm the grammar schools, and that future policy would be a matter for a Labour Government if and when one were elected. The council passed the buck to the Government, but the Government are now passing it back. Ultimately, however, the buck will rest fairly and squarely with the Labour party, which is maintaining its hostility to these excellent schools.

The amendments leave considerable room for confusion; they are not as good as we may have wanted. However, they would rightly make it more clear which parents are eligible to vote in ballots. The consultation paper on the matter is something of a dog's breakfast; it contains completely different eligibility criteria for different types of grammar schools—those that stand alone, those in groups and those that are in wholly selective LEA areas. The Government must say exactly why they believe it appropriate that only parents of children in primary feeder schools should vote on the future of some grammar schools, whereas all parents of school-age children—primary or secondary—may vote on the future of others.

The amendments also deal with the payment of costs that are necessarily incurred not in campaigning, but in the petitioning and balloting procedure. They would ensure that the Bill specified that a petition would have to meet a 20 per cent. threshold before a ballot could be called. That is welcome, although I should prefer a higher threshold.

A more important point—whether there should be a minimum majority requirement in any ballot—is left open. It is wrong that vastly important decisions on the future of many schools could be taken by a small number of parents. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford, I believe that the criteria that apply in ballots on trade union recognition could reasonably apply in school ballots; I do not understand why, in trade union ballots, 40 per cent. of those eligible must vote whereas, in ballots on schools, a simple majority of any number of parents is sufficient. I should like the Bill to be clearer on that.

Lords amendment No. 118 is rather worrying. Is my understanding correct—that it would remove the power for Ministers to establish how the result of a ballot is to be ascertained? If so, is the Minister deliberately endorsing a position whereby the Government give up the power to set a minimum threshold for a majority requirement to come into the balloting procedure?

This is possibly the biggest issue of concern to my constituents. The onus must be firmly on those who seek to change a system that works so well. In the borough of Trafford, that system achieves the best A-level results in the country, and the 10th best GCSE results; in Buckinghamshire, it achieves the best GCSE results. That should be borne in mind by those who want to introduce a balloting system that could throw away those advantages far too cheaply.

Which are the designated areas? Has the Minister given further thought to whether greater emphasis on the truly local might be appropriate in the balloting procedure? For the grammar schools in Altrincham, the catchment area would be a far more appropriate boundary for balloting and parental eligibility than the whole borough of Trafford.

Some of the changes are welcome, but some are cause for concern. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford made clear, the changes will cause massive disruption not only through the balloting procedure itself but if a ballot should decide to get rid of selective schools. In any shift towards comprehensive schools, there is a reduction in the number and diversity of schools and in parental choice, and standards generally go down. To throw away the high standards in some of the best schools in the country would be unfortunate at a time when the Government say that they are focusing on the need to raise standards.

One of the most unfortunate effects of the ballot campaigns, if and when they happen, will arise from the attitude of those who oppose selection. They talk about the children in secondary modern schools being consigned to failure at 11, and risk damaging and discouraging those children. The Secretary of State regularly visits my constituency, although he has not so far taken the time to visit one of my grammar schools, but when Ministers come to my constituency, they will see that both the grammar schools and the secondary modern schools are excellent. At a school such as New Wellington school, where I was last night—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying rather wide of the mark again. Will he come back to the amendments?

Mr. Brady: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was simply seeking to emphasise the point that one of the most damaging effects of the ballot campaigns could be the erroneous argument that we are dealing with some pupils who have failed and some who succeed. We are dealing with pupils who are being educated appropriately for their abilities and the way in which they are best able to learn. The system works and those people who detract from it or oppose the retention of a selective education system, where we still have one, are doing a disservice to children in secondary modern schools.

9.15 pm

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) accused the Government of incoherence in these amendments, which was typically kind—I would accuse them of intolerance. Change for the sake of change is undesirable, but creating the potential for change for its own sake is also deeply undesirable.

The technical amendments are not contentious, but funding is more complex and the amendment that deals with it is welcome in the sense that it would free governing bodies to set out a clear and resolute case in defence of their school—or not, if they do not wish to defend it, although I cannot imagine that that would be the case—and because it prohibits the spending of public money. As we have seen with the ballots for grant-maintained schools, the problem is that there are cleverer and more sinister ways to fund extremely negative and dirty campaigns, often perpetrated by the less wise members of the Labour party—not like the hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard).

The reservation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) alluded is right and proper, and the amendment does not go sufficiently far towards controlling that sort of activity. As I said, I am concerned that there will be dirty campaigns, but I disagree with my hon. Friend, in that I do not think that the Labour party will be able to escape the blame. If there are any petitions or campaigns in south Lincolnshire, we shall nail the blame where it belongs.

Indeed, many of us would welcome the opportunity to do so, because the ballot and the process that leads to it, which is implicit in this legislation, will be deeply unpopular with parents of grammar school pupils, parents with children at feeder schools who believe that they will have a chance of getting to grammar school—usually a greater proportion of the children than ultimately get there—and people who have a relationship with the school past and present, in other words, much of the community. Electorally, that would be an undesirable move from the Government's point of view and it would not be in their interests.

I must point out two other aspects of the Bill, the first of which has not been mentioned. What will be the effect of the provisions on the discretion of local education authorities? Lincolnshire LEA is Conservative-controlled, but, until the last election, it was under Labour control and, during that time, it chose not to interfere with

[Mr. Hayes]

grammar schools. That may have had more to do with the practical business of trying to remain popular—clearly it failed, as Labour was thrown out—than with any philosophical commitment to selection; notwithstanding that, the LEA had the right to make a decision that was sensitive to local traditions, opinion and needs.

The Bill would certainly inhibit and restrict the freedom of democratically elected county councillors or members of LEAs to make decisions appropriate for their areas. That returns us to the contradiction between a centrally controlled, dictated and uniform system, which in fairness may be designed to drive up standards, and the flexibility and diversity from which education benefits so greatly, which gives local people the power to make local decisions that best match the needs of local communities.

My final point was dealt with to some extent but needs amplification. Where selection exists, it is good not merely for the children who are selected but for children in primary schools, who try to attain the necessary standard to gain admission to the local grammar school, and for many secondary modern schools. In the past, I have mentioned good schools in Spalding—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Again, the hon. Gentleman is going wide of the amendments.

Mr. Hayes: In summary, then, the amendments fail to deal with the maintenance of high standards across the primary and secondary education systems where selection exists. We shall fight to retain not only grammar schools but all good schools where local people want them.

Mr. Byers: I shall seek to deal only with points raised about the amendments, so I can be fairly brief. I listened with interest to those points. I have met several hon. Members and delegations from their constituencies, including representatives of grammar schools, and head teachers. I have also visited grammar schools to see the quality of the education that they provide.

As the Minister responsible for school standards, I should be mindful of all the arguments, but that does not mean that all of them can be incorporated in regulations. The regulations on which we are consulting are better and fairer than they would have been had I not heard those representations. They go nowhere near meeting the concerns expressed by many Conservative Members, but they improve on what might have been had we not heard those concerns.

As the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), who made his points well, has said, I met him and a delegation from grammar schools in his constituency. The draft regulations are out for consultation, which will finish at the end of July, and we shall produce the regulations in due course.

The hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) asked about timing. We want the House to have an opportunity to debate and vote on the regulations affecting grammar schools, and we shall produce a timetable that will ensure that hon. Members can do so. We are conscious of the strong views held by Conservative Members and Labour Members on grammar schools. I want the regulations to be as fair as possible, and I want to ensure that people feel that they have had an opportunity to express their views.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful for that commitment. I apologise if I am pre-empting the Minister, but I am keen that he should address the question whether any of the amendments—particularly Lords amendment No. 118 on the possibility of a threshold majority—would limit the scope of regulations to take account of the consultation exercise.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman made a couple of points to which I intended to return. He is right to say that Lords amendment No. 118 removes reference to regulations specifying how the result of a ballot will be determined. It does that because Lords amendment No. 128 ensures that the Bill will say how regulations will be determined. The hon. Gentleman referred to the definition and impact of designated areas, which are important to his constituency. I intend designated areas to be included in draft regulations, so the hon. Gentleman will be able to debate them and vote on them. There will be an opportunity to revisit the issue in more detail once the regulations specify the designated areas. I hope that that meets some of his concerns.

The onus for change will rest on those advocating change. There is no doubt that, in so important a decision as the future of grammar schools and the selective system, there will be a high turnout among parents. That is why we have not been persuaded to specify a minimum turnout in the Bill or regulations. We have provided that a minimum of 20 per cent. of parents should sign the petition to requisition a ballot, but, once a ballot has been called, the nature and importance of the decision will ensure a high turnout among the parents eligible to take part.

I do not believe that this is a betrayal by the Government. Our manifesto clearly stated that the future of grammar schools would be a matter for local determination by parents. That is what we are seeking to do in the regulations under the Bill and in the draft regulations that will come forward in due course. Let us be clear: it will not be the Labour Government who close a grammar school, but local parents. That is only right and proper. Where grammar schools have broad support, they have nothing to fear from the Bill.

I hope that I have been able to address some of the issues raised by Conservative Members, if not to satisfy them. We will have the chance to revisit the matter when we go through the affirmative resolution procedure for the regulations. I will make sure that the draft regulations are published in a way that ensures a debate in this House and in the House of Lords. The Lords amendments improve the Bill, and I am pleased that they have had a broad welcome from Opposition Members. I hope that the House will agree with the Lords in its amendments.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 116 to 129 agreed to [one with Special Entry].

Clause 107

SCHOOL MEALS

Lords amendment: No. 130, in page 81, leave out line 31 and insert

("schools maintained by local education authorities.")

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 131 to 136.

Ms Morris: The amendments clarify the powers taken in the legislation on school meals. They extend the

Secretary of State's power to set nutritional standards for lunches served in pupil referral units and maintained nursery schools. Part of the reason for that clarification is that the original wording dealt with maintained schools and schools maintained by local authorities. We found that PRUs and maintained nursery schools fell outside the legislation.

The amendments place a duty on local authorities to provide paid lunches for pupils under compulsory school age only when those pupils are full-time. Many pupils under school age who attend nursery are part-time. We have not put a duty on local authorities to provide lunches in those circumstances. Where lunches are provided for children under the legal age of starting school, they should abide by the nutritional standards on which we shall shortly consult.

The amendments also define what a school lunch is, in case anyone has any doubt or has forgotten the days when we used to partake of them.

Mr. Don Foster: Great.

Ms Morris: I am not sure that "great" is the adjective that I would apply. School meals can be but are not always a set meal. As we know, the majority of secondary schools and an increasing number of primary schools now have a cafeteria-style system rather than providing the same set meal that every child must eat.

The amendment clarifies the meaning of a school meal, so that, when we consult on the nutritional standards, all children benefit from an important attempt to ensure that our children grow up on a healthy diet and are encouraged to eat such.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 131 to 136 agreed to.

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 137, after clause 116, to insert the following new clause—*Travel arrangements for children receiving nursery education otherwise than at school*—

". After section 509 of the Education Act 1996 there shall be inserted—

"Travel arrangements for children receiving nursery education otherwise than at school.

509A.—(1) A local education authority may provide a child with assistance under this section if they are satisfied that, without such assistance, he would be prevented from attending at any premises—

(a) which are not a school or part of a school, but

(b) at which relevant nursery education is provided,

for the purpose of receiving such education there.

(2) The assistance which may be provided for a child under this section consists of either—

(a) making arrangements (whether for the provision of transport or otherwise) for the purpose of facilitating the child's attendance at the premises concerned, or

(b) paying the whole or any part of his reasonable travel expenses.

(3) When considering whether to provide a child with assistance under this section in connection with his attendance at any premises, a local education authority may have regard (among other things) to whether it would be reasonable to expect alternative arrangements to be made for him to receive relevant nursery education at any other premises (whether nearer to his home or otherwise).

(4) Where the assistance to be provided for a child under this section consists of making arrangements for the provision of transport, the authority may, if they consider it appropriate to do so, determine that the assistance shall not be so provided unless—

(a) the child's parent, or

(b) the person providing the relevant nursery education concerned,

agrees to make to the authority such payments in respect of the provision of the transport (not exceeding the cost to the authority of its provision) as they may determine.

(5) In this section "relevant nursery education" means nursery education which is provided—

(a) by a local education authority, or

(b) by any other person

(i) who is in receipt of financial assistance given by such an authority and whose provision of nursery education is taken into account by the authority in formulating proposals for the purposes of section 113(2)(a) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, or

(ii) who is in receipt of grants under section 1 of the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996." "

9.30 pm

Ms Estelle Morris: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 367. I inform the House that amendment No. 137 involves privilege.

Ms Morris: Amendment No. 137 allows local authorities to provide transport for those in nursery education. Again, it involves a definition of a school and of early years education—which is of course before the age at which school officially starts. As we move into an era in which all four-year-olds are entitled to early years education—the announcement that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made today will double the number of three-year-olds in early years education to 66 per cent. within three years—it is important that we give attention to school transport for this age group.

The amendment will benefit parents, providers of nursery education and local authorities, by giving a power to provide transport or help with transport expenses for children travelling to and from settings where part-time education for children under five is provided. I reassure hon. Members that included within the amendment will be all the providers who contribute to the early years development plan. It will be not only for the maintained schools but for the voluntary and independent sector.

Mrs. Browning: Will the Minister say what sort of transport she has in mind for three and four-year-olds? Almost certainly, most three-year-olds travelling on public transport would require a high level of supervision. Few parents would willingly put a three-year-old on a minibus or public transport vehicle without a lot of reassurances. I am thinking of staffing ratios, safety belts and the suitability of the vehicle. Would children of that age be expected to share transport with older children travelling to their separate schools? One can see all sorts

[Mrs. Browning]

of problems if tiny children are mixed in with seven, eight or even 11-year-olds. What exactly does she have in mind?

Ms Morris: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The notion of a three-year-old plonked on a minibus with no security or supervision is one with which neither parents nor the Government would be happy. The purpose of the amendment is in this primary legislation is to give local authorities the power to use money to provide transport. That is an important step. I reassure the hon. Lady that I believe that the age group clearly needs special consideration. As we move forward, we shall issue guidance to local authorities, to ensure that young children are protected. We shall consult not only local authorities but parents, traditional providers of school transport and others. I reassure the hon. Lady that I certainly see the needs of this age group as different and special compared to those of secondary age children, who are the bulk of the children who travel to school.

I feel strongly that most young children should go to a nursery setting near where they live. I think that that will happen in most cases, but in rural areas or perhaps occasionally to meet parents' demands or preferences, it may be necessary to place a child further away. If we do not take the power to ensure that local authorities can spend money for this purpose, we might be denying places to children who might otherwise be able to have them. I assure the hon. Lady that we shall give proper consideration to the points that she has raised when we draw up the guidance and advice.

Mr. Brady: The Minister has touched on the point that I wish to raise—the question of distance travelled by very small children. I wanted to flag up my concern about the possibility of the amount of time taken by a long journey to nursery school being considered, by some parents, to be a partial solution to a child care problem. I am not saying that it would happen often, but it strikes me as a cause for concern, because I know of some cases in which children are put on certain types of transport because it takes longer to get to school. I ask the Minister to take that into account when drawing up the guidelines.

Ms Morris: I have visions of children in Altrincham and Sale, West being driven around on the bus for an hour before school and two hours after school to fit in with their parents' working arrangements. I am sure that it does not happen often, but I take the point.

I want to assure the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members that, when an early years development plan is sent to the Department for approval, one of the things that we check is distance, because we need to be sure that the children covered by the plan do not have to travel unreasonable distances. That was an issue that we took up with many local authorities when they published their plan, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is something that we shall continue to watch carefully. As a Government who have put an extra £400 million into child care, we do not need to have children riding around on the underground to meet their parents' child care needs. That is not one of our solutions.

Amendment No. 367 will allow the Secretary of State to require local authorities to publish details of their nursery transport policy, in the same way as they currently publish school and college transport details. I hope that that will further allay the concerns expressed by the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). The transport arrangements made will be clear both to parents, so that they know what is available, and—perhaps as important—to local authorities and the Government, so that we can be sure that they are proper.

Lords amendment agreed to. [Special Entry.]

Clause 119

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR SECURING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LEAS AND MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Lords amendment: No. 138, in page 90, line 37, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

("(3) Section 80 shall apply in relation to the code as it applies in relation to a code of practice under section 79.")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Members of the Standing Committee, of whom there are several present tonight, will know that one of the issues that received cross-party support was the need to establish a code of practice covering the relationship between LEAs and individual schools. We published the draft code for consultation and I am pleased that it has been widely welcomed by schools in all sectors and by local education authorities and Church education authorities. The draft code managed to strike the right balance between competing, and sometimes conflicting, aims and objectives.

However, several hon. Members expressed the view in Committee that, although the code was useful, there should be parliamentary approval for it. Attention was drawn to the admissions code, which will be subject to parliamentary approval, and hon. Members argued that it would be appropriate for the code of practice for local education authority and individual school relations to be subject to parliamentary approval as well. The Government considered that point and moved amendment No. 138 in the House of Lords, which provides that the code of practice will be subject to parliamentary approval. I hope that that arrangement will meet with the approval of the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 120

RESTRICTIONS ON FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO NON-MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Lords amendment: No. 139, in page 91, line 24, leave out ("Subject to subsection (2),")

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 140 and the Government motion to disagree thereto.

I must inform the House that amendment No. 139 involves privilege.

Mr. Blunkett: I remember that, when the Bill returned from Committee for Report and Third Reading, we had

this debate at about 3 o'clock in the morning. Given the length of today's debates and the pressure on the House, I do not intend to go over all that old ground. Suffice it to say that we are dealing not with partnership agreements but with an amendment that was understood in the Lords to be determined to remove any objections to the introduction of an alternative assisted places scheme. That would be the effect if we did not overturn the decision of the Lords.

The Lords carried the amendment by one vote, with the help of hereditary peers and against the Government's express wishes and our manifesto commitment. The Lords knew exactly what would be the impact of the amendment, and Lord Lucas made no bones about where he stood.

The debate is not about reaching partnership agreements. The Bill does not in any way infringe the ability of local authorities to purchase places for special educational needs requirements. It does not interfere with the legitimacy of local authorities in having sensible discretion, but our position on the amendment would stop them introducing assisted places schemes, which the House voted to abolish in a separate Bill, which received Royal Assent on 31 July 1997. A year later, we are back where we started. We simply cannot progress in this way.

The atmosphere is entirely different from that of Monday night, but we should not waste each other's time. Enough time has been wasted in this Session putting this and other Bills on the statute book. I do not mind sensible, rational debate, but repeating the same rational arguments time and again and having the Lords making amendments that they know perfectly well will be overturned by the Commons and playing silly political games does not endear people to the democratic process.

I want the House tonight to adopt the simple principle that we passed a Bill last summer, we have a manifesto commitment, we know perfectly well what we are doing, and we are not interfering with legitimate partnership arrangements, but we will not have other people introducing assisted places schemes, which we have abolished. What is more, we will not allow public money to be used to purchase provision in the specific circumstances that apply to the operation of assisted places schemes. That money, which is allocated through the taxpayer by the Government, is for reducing class sizes, improving standards and ensuring that children get a decent education wherever they go.

That is why we shall overturn the amendments. I hope that we shall not have, as we did ad nauseam until 10 past 5 in the morning on Report and Third Reading, people playing silly devils.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for reminding us that this is a far more reasonable hour than the early morning to consider the important points raised by the amendments. The strength of feeling on the matter could not have been more evident in our previous discussion, but the strength of argument will be greater at this time.

The Secretary of State had the gall to suggest that, by abolishing the assisted places scheme, the Government have been able to afford everything that they are doing for the education service. The facts speak for themselves. On their own figures, by the third year, the cumulative saving from abolishing the assisted places would be only £100 million, and we heard only the other day from the Minister for School Standards that the cost of simply reducing class sizes would be £100 million a year. Today, we hear that the Government are spending £150 million of capital on building new classrooms for that project. Regardless of whether one agrees with lower class sizes—we have acknowledged that there is something to be said for that objective—no one can pretend that abolishing assisted places went anywhere near paying for that project, let alone the Government's other ambitions.

Labour Members may ask what this has to do with the amendment. That is a very good point. The amendment does not ask the Government to rediscover or reproduce that £40 million a year. It simply asks the Government to accept that local councils, with the support of local schools, parents, charities and sponsors, should be allowed to take advantage of the chance to give some local children for whom the idea is appropriate their best opportunity in life. That chance should not be denied by the prejudice that Labour Members have displayed not only in this House but in another place.

I am delighted to report to the House that Surrey county council recently received a glowing report from Ofsted. There can be no doubt that Surrey LEA achieves some of the best results for children of any LEA in the country. Surrey wants to introduce a partnership places scheme with local schools because of local conditions and local ambitions to achieve the best result for every child.

9.45 pm

The Secretary of State appeared to be trapped in the past; he appeared to be hung up on the old assisted places scheme. The Conservatives believe that that scheme had a lot to offer, but we want to go one better: we want to build on our experience, not deny it. In developing a new partnership scheme at the local education authority level, we want to build a scheme that will not demand a pound extra from the Department for Education and Employment but will introduce additional resources from outside the local education authority budget.

It is ironic that I have been in continual correspondence with the Minister for School Standards concerning the schools budget in Surrey. He tells me time and again how much more he would like Surrey county council to spend on education—and Surrey county council would certainly like to delegate more of its budget to education. However, the Minister's colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have cut the council's funding allocation. In a year when council tax has had to be increased by more than 10 per cent., there is a limit to how much local tax payers can bear.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying wide of the amendment. I ask him not to talk in generalities, but to return to the amendment that is before the House.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The problem is that local education authority budgets are constrained by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions at the same time as the Department for Education and Employment demands that LEAs spend more on education. We have identified that we can spend more on local children by introducing money from private sources and the independent sector.

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

It is clear from the comments of the Secretary of State tonight, and from those of his colleagues on previous occasions, that they wish to deny us that opportunity of increasing the amount that is spent on children in Surrey and in other county council areas.

I have no more wish than the Secretary of State to cover old ground, so let us consider what has happened since the House last debated the issue. Several schemes involving independent schools and the Government were submitted to the Secretary of State; Only 16 per cent. of them were accepted. More than four out of five of the schemes developed and produced locally have been knocked down by the Department for Education and Employment. What confidence can we have that, under the regulations that the Government are demanding be reimposed by knocking out the Lords amendment, the Department will adopt a slightly more broad-minded approach and allow local education authorities—such as Surrey—which have been innovative and imaginative, to use their initiative to come up with their own schemes, instead of being constrained by the ideological diktats of the Labour party?

I quote briefly from the debate on the matter in the House of Lords. Baroness Blackstone, speaking of the clause that the Government are seeking to reinstate, said:

"The key objective is to prevent LEAs establishing the assisted places scheme at a local level."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 June 1998; Vol. 590, c. 1473.]

Let us contrast those comments with the words of the Secretary of State, not so long ago, in the autumn of 1995—when he was seeking votes, not merely enjoying power—when speaking to the Independent Schools Information Service, the independent schools' spokesbody. The front cover of its magazine of that period bore the headline:

"Labour: Ready to be friends?"

That magazine reports that, in answer to the question,

"Would that be locally determined or would there be some kind of national scheme?"

the current Secretary of State said:

"Primarily we would have to allow local judgments".

Primarily, all that the Lords amendments are seeking is that we allow local judgments.

Mr. Blunkett: Not to prolong the debate but just for clarification, I should say that my remarks referred entirely to the type of excellent scheme that my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has approved for the development of the links between St. George's community school in inner-city Bristol and the Wells cathedral school. It is entirely at that level that they developed that programme, and we supported it with resources.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am all for links between choir schools—one of my children attended one—and I am all for links with ballet schools. I am all for all sorts of local links, depending on local circumstances. It is not for the Secretary of State to dictate what those circumstances are.

If we are talking of excellence, let us refer to the recent research published in *The Times Educational Supplement* of 27 March 1998, which found that

"potential high-flyers who do not have university-educated parents have greater difficulty realising their potential in comprehensives than in private schools."

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is now widening the debate again. Will he please return to the amendment before the House?

Mr. St. Aubyn: With respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are talking about leaving with local authorities a power to develop a scheme under which such children can go to independent schools if it is judged in their best interests—a power which the Secretary of State has made it clear he wishes to deny to such children.

The message of that report, reported in *The Times Educational Supplement*, is that some such children clearly benefit from such an education. If I may, I shall quote very briefly from that report again. The report concluded—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. The hon. Gentleman must speak much more directly to the amendment. This is not a general debate.

Mr. St. Aubyn: There is clear evidence that children who win an assisted place at a private school go on to a better university and a better job than would otherwise be the case.

That raises the next issue. Should the question of local partnerships between local schools and a local education authority be determined locally in the interests of the child, or by the Minister in the interests of his policy? On a number of occasions, the Government have prayed in aid schemes that they deign to approve. In the House of Lords debate that I mentioned, the Front-Bench spokesman for the Government cited a scheme in Bromley.

It is ironic that the council in Bromley wants to enter a partnership scheme involving independent schools that is much wider than the one that the Department has approved. The reason is that there is a problem of class sizes in local secondary schools. If the council can buy places at local independent schools for the children for whom that is most appropriate, the class size problem in secondary schools will be alleviated.

The Government's announcement this afternoon of new classes to be built is not relevant to Bromley. Many of those schools are already over-subscribed, and lack the space to build new classrooms on their own ground. Therefore, the ability to buy places at other schools in the area answers a local need. However, we know from what the Minister has said before and what we have heard tonight that Bromley education authority and LEAs in Surrey and elsewhere will be denied the possibility of coping with a local problem in a way that answers their needs and those of children, parents and local schools, including those in the maintained sector.

If such a scheme were allowed, it is implicit in the Lords amendment that the selection of children to go to the local schools should be determined locally, which means involving the local education authority.

Mr. Don Foster: Hear, hear.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who has previously compared the

situation to that of the nomination rights of a local authority in a local housing association. If, in devising a local scheme, an LEA wished to claim nomination rights, under the Lords amendment that the Government seek to reject, it would have those rights if it made them part of the scheme. It is right and proper that an LEA should have the power to do so.

The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to whom he reports were both taken to court by an 11-year-old child in order to make them meet their commitment to see that child through with an assisted place at the same school until the end of the child's education. The child had to learn that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I want to explain to the hon. Gentleman that this is not a debate about the assisted places scheme. Will he now speak specifically to the amendments before the House?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I want the Minister to comment. If he is intractable in his insistence on the regulations that his amendment seeks to reimpose, does he consider it reasonable that children who currently have an assisted place, who have a reasonable expectation, based on his comments and those of his Prime Minister, that they will see that education through to the age of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman cannot speak to the amendments, I suggest that he close his remarks.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am about to do so, but this relates to whether we should accept the amendment from the Secretary of State. If he is prepared to concede that, in the regulations that his amendment anticipates, he will allow children who currently have an assisted place to see their education through with the help of their LEA, that would be a move in the right direction. I urge the House to reject the Government's proposals.

Mr. Hayes: I am grateful to be called, and I will be brief. *[Interruption.]* Some hon. Members who have recently entered the Chamber are trying to make contributions; they may want to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in order to make more formal contributions.

In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State remarkably combined pomposity with fatuousness. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman is now impersonating a seal, so we can add that to the cocktail. The fatuous element of his speech was his statement that we had not moved forward since this time last year. In fact, the House of Lords has suggested something quite different: partnership schemes—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the School Standards and Framework Bill and the Teaching and Higher Education Bill *[Lords]* may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Lords amendment again considered.

Mr. Hayes: In regard to fatuousness, the Secretary of State has moved no further forward. The solution suggested in the Lords amendment is different from the solution that we discussed when the matter first came before the House. Their Lordships suggest local discretion: they suggest that local people, through local education authorities, should be allowed to develop community schemes.

I know that it is some time since the Secretary of State served in local government, where he established a distinguished record; and I know that, once some people come to this place, they often forget their roots. Perhaps the Secretary of State has forgotten his. It is understandable: buoyed by money and power, people do forget. Nevertheless, I ask the right hon. Gentleman to bear in mind the fact that discretion, innovation, choice and diversity will result from allowing local communities to devise schemes that are sensitive and responsive to local traditions and needs. Surely, in the context of his education policies, the Secretary of State should take that on board.

We are not debating—or re-debating, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested—the principle of assisted places. Of course the Government have a mandate to deal with the issue in whatever way they wish. We are debating the Lords, considered and intelligent attempt to amend Government policy to allow for local discretion. In the interests of local democracy, in the interests of innovation and, surely, in the interests of trying to make the policy more moderate, the Secretary of State should give ground.

I shall end on this point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, rather than testing your patience any further. I mentioned pomposity. I think that pomposity emanates from a Secretary of State and a Government who object to any revision of their policy. This is not about the hereditary principle—although the Secretary of State threw that into his remarks as a cutting aside; it is about the opportunity to question, to challenge, to attempt to moderate and to amend policies that are born of little more than arrogance.

Mr. Brady: I shall endeavour not to try your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that of Labour Members—even the Secretary of State, who began this short debate by saying that he had become rather tired of proper democratic discussion of the subject. If he will give me a specific assurance on this very precise matter, I guarantee that I shall sit down immediately, and not say another word. I hope that we can work together for the benefit of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), who has made a strenuous case for the partnership places scheme that the people of Surrey have chosen to introduce. However, I want to deal with a very different matter, relating to circumstances that many of my constituents have enjoyed for some 50 years, going back to the second world war. I refer to the practice of the borough of Trafford, and what used to be Cheshire county council, of sending Roman Catholic pupils to fee-paying St. Bede's grammar school in order to provide denominational education in a co-educational environment.

I am pleased to see my neighbour, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins), in his place. I believe that he benefited from the excellent education that St. Bede's has to offer. I do not know whether he did so through a fee-paying arrangement or with the help of the local authority, as many of my constituents still do.

I shall be less concerned about the Government's proposals if the Secretary of State can give me a simple assurance that the historic practice of the borough of

[Mr. Brady]

Trafford of providing extra denominational places by sending children to a fee-paying Roman Catholic grammar school will not be affected by the Bill. I do not believe that the clause was intended to cover a situation such as that of St. Bede's. It was specifically intended to rule out any deliberate return to the assisted places scheme through other means. I accept what the Secretary of State has said on that. I do not believe that there was an intention to prevent a local authority from continuing a practice that has gone on with wide acceptance for many years.

The practice has become controversial this year, because the ruling Labour group on Trafford council, which came to power a couple of years ago, has decided to end it. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Trafford—I welcome the support of the Liberal Democrat Members here, backing up their local people in Trafford—have guaranteed that, if and when they take back control of the borough, they will restore the practice of funding places at St. Bede's. The issue is of vital local significance.

The council's withdrawal of the scheme has caused considerable difficulty in the provision of denominational places for Roman Catholic children. There are now insufficient places, and Catholic children are having to go to non-Catholic schools against their wishes. I would welcome an assurance that the Secretary of State will not use the powers in the Bill to prevent the borough of Trafford from continuing the practice, which has gone on for 50 years, of sending Roman Catholic children to a co-educational denominational school which happens to be fee-paying.

Mr. Don Foster: I find myself in a difficult position. I agree more with the tone of the remarks of the Secretary of State than with what I have heard from the Conservatives, but I shall vote against the Secretary of State's recommendation. I shall try to explain why.

The Secretary of State rightly made clear his strong opposition to the assisted places scheme introduced by the previous Government. I entirely support him on that. We voted with him to bring about the end of the centralised assisted places scheme, which did not meet even the conditions laid down for it.

The Secretary of State has also said how much he is in favour of the development of partnerships between the state and independent sectors. I praise him and his Minister for their work on developing opportunities for such links to flourish. In about 1993, in an interview with the Independent Schools Information Service magazine, I talked about the importance of links between the state and independent sectors. About two years later, the current Secretary of State also gave an interview in which he repeated, almost word for word, what I had said. There is great agreement between us on the issue. We both believe in the importance of partnership between the two sectors.

The amendments relate to changes to the Education Act 1996. Section 518 of the Act made it possible for LEAs

"to pay the whole or any part of the fees and expenses payable"

at fee-paying schools. The Government want to replace that section, which the Lords oppose, so that LEAs may not pay all or part of the fees or expenses payable at independent schools unless regulations allow them to do so. The Government are to constrain a permissive power in regulation that no hon. Member has yet had the opportunity to see. We do not know what constraints central the Government will impose on local government.

It is the duty of local education authorities to seek to meet the educational needs of children in their areas and to ensure high-quality education for every child. If necessary, it is right and proper for LEAs to seek to meet some of those needs through other education providers as they see fit, which may include the independent school sector. Local, democratically elected LEAs should be given unfettered powers to decide how best to meet needs. I do not want a return to the centralised assisted places scheme.

In another place, their lordships decided that it was inappropriate for central Government to try to lay down in regulations, which, as I have said, we have not yet seen, limits on how LEAs should choose to develop partnerships. I support in its entirety the view of their Lordships' House. It would be wrong for central Government to impose regulations on local government about how it should fulfil its fundamental responsibilities to provide high-quality education for every child in its area.

Mrs. May: I was disappointed by the way in which the Secretary of State opened the debate. This debate is not about the assisted places scheme. We have had that debate, and legislation on it has gone through the House—whatever our views of the rights or wrongs of the Government's policy. This debate is about partnership between local education authorities and independent schools in or beyond their areas.

I was also disappointed that the Secretary of State again told the House that we should take absolutely no notice of amendments agreed in another place. He more or less dismissed the other place as something that should not exist. Is the Secretary of State suggesting that the Government's position is that there should be no revising Chamber? Should they choose to introduce proposals on such a position, they would have a very difficult time. The other place has a valid role as a revising Chamber, looking again at legislation passed by this House. We are given the opportunity to think again on the basis of what their Lordships propose.

The Lords amendments would allow local education authorities freely to enter into partnership with independent schools, as opposed to the Government's rather prescriptive arrangements. Such arrangements are hardly surprising given the prescription throughout the Bill, which even includes, as we learned earlier, what constitutes the school meal. The Lords are rightly saying that that flexibility and freedom should be there for local education authorities.

10.15 pm

I find it somewhat surprising that the Government are opposing the Lords amendments on that matter, given the statements that have been made by the Secretary of State and others about partnerships between the public and private sectors. Only in February, in a speech to the Labour party local government conference, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"The central thrust of the policy is to encourage innovation in order to provide higher standards in places where current provision is inadequate. It is in this context that we are keen to develop new public-private partnerships."

The White Paper, "Excellence in schools", contains a section on independent schools, which says:

"The new partnership should embrace independent as well as state schools . . . The educational apartheid created by the public/private divide diminishes the whole education system".

Mr. Blunkett: Hear, hear.

Mrs. May: If the Secretary of State genuinely stands by what he said in the White Paper about partnerships between independent schools and the state sector, he should welcome the Lords amendments and agree with them, because they are an attempt to ensure that the Bill puts into practice the statements made by the Government in their White Paper.

Even more recently, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation at the beginning of this month, the Minister for School Standards said:

"We believe that bridges should be built to enable the independent sector to play a part in our standards agenda. The response from the private sector has been extremely positive. Old hostilities are being put to one side".

The hon. Gentleman may have thought on 1 July that old hostilities were being put to one side, but it is clear from the speech by the Secretary of State about these amendments that that has not happened. If the Minister for School Standards stands by what he said to the Social Market Foundation, he too should support the Lords amendments, because that is precisely what they would do.

The amendments would give the local education authorities the opportunity to put together, with businesses, the private sector and independent schools in their areas, schemes that could work to the benefit of the children of the area in terms of the education provided. They would allow LEAs the whip hand; they would have the nomination rights and could determine where those rights would be taken up and how they would be allocated. The LEAs would be able to say, "Here is a child for whom we cannot in the normal course of events provide the education that we believe would be right. We believe that that could be provided by an independent school, so we will enter into a partnership so that that can be done."

That concept is accepted throughout the House in relation to children with special educational needs. Local authorities often cannot meet such children's needs within their own schools, so a place has to be bought in the non-maintained sector. I suggest that very bright children have needs every bit as special as those of others who are more naturally considered in the category of having special educational needs. If a local educational authority chooses to educate a child with those special needs outside the maintained sector, it should be free to do so. The Lords amendments would give freedom at local level.

I return to the issue that we have heard about throughout our debates tonight. Ministers stand up and talk about the importance of local decision taking, meeting local needs and accepting local circumstances, yet if we judge by how they vote on the Lords amendments and what they put into their legislation, the message is different.

Ministers are trying to restrain what goes on at local level, and to restrict the rights, flexibility and freedom of local education authorities. The amendments are about giving LEAs the opportunity to enter into partnerships with the private sector—partnerships that Ministers applaud in their rhetoric. However, as we see yet again, the reality of what the Government are doing is far from their rhetoric. The Lords amendments are about giving extra freedoms and flexibility to local education authorities to provide the education that is right for the children of their area. On that basis, we should support them.

Mr. Blunkett: I am sad that the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) has taken the view that he has. If I had read his 1993 speech, I would have saved myself about 55 minutes by ticking it and handing it over to the Independent Schools Information Service. We could have saved ourselves a lot of bother. Nobody is against discretion, and nobody wants to stop local authorities entering partnerships or placing children for special reasons.

I say to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) that, if the local authority should in future choose to exercise its discretion, it would be able to do so in the circumstances that he described.

I was deeply offended and hurt by the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), not least because I love the area that he represents. To be called pompous, or whatever it was—was it fatuous?—was deeply offensive. It has hurt me.

Mr. Brady: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly will. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not going to hurt me as well.

Mr. Brady: I am seeking to atone for any offence that may have been caused, by giving the right hon. Gentleman heartfelt thanks on behalf of my constituents and the people of the borough of Trafford. They will be grateful for his assurance that should they choose, through the democratic process locally, to elect parties that support the provision of places at St. Bede's, they will be allowed to do so.

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful, but I regret that that is unlikely to prevent the hon. Gentleman from voting against us. However, I am always happy to make others happy.

I cannot make the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) happy, because he did not address the issue at all—he addressed something entirely different, which underpins why we cannot accept the Lords' view. In the end, what the Lords' view entails is exactly what the hon. Member for Guildford wants—to introduce an alternative assisted places scheme. He simply wants to be able to flout what we agreed in this House last year. For that reason, I say to the hon. Member for Bath that politics is full of guile, hidden meanings and what is written between the lines. When Conservative Members talk about partnership, they mean an assisted places scheme.

[Mr. Blunkett]

Mr. Don Foster: The Secretary of State is absolutely right—politics is about reading between the lines. The problem is that we have no lines to read between. We have not been given the opportunity even to look at draft regulations in relation to the clause. Will he acknowledge that, unless we have some indication of what sort of fettering powers he intends to impose on local education authorities, it will be difficult for anybody to accept that he should be given carte blanche to stop LEAs doing what they think is appropriate?

Mr. Blunkett: If the hon. Gentleman has accepted that we are entering partnership arrangements—which we are—he has accepted that we will not fetter any discretion in relation to special educational needs. We are dealing with the introduction of discretion to provide for an assisted places scheme at local level, which is what the hon Member for Guildford was advocating.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly will. I am hoping for some clarification of the matter.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I have been thrown into confusion by the Secretary of State. He accused me of being pompous, but then complained when my colleague returned the compliment. What is being claimed by the Lords, and what has been claimed in debate after debate in this House, is the right for local authorities to decide what is needed locally, building beyond the assisted places scheme with newer, more positive schemes. The right hon. Gentleman has gone on time and again about the number of children in classes in primary schools. If a local education authority seeks to reduce the number of children in a class in a secondary school by sending some other children to an independent school in the same area, will he deny that class smaller numbers in the classroom?

Mr. Blunkett: The Government are doing a great deal about reducing numbers in the classroom, some of which we announced this afternoon. The idea that, in order to reduce numbers in a secondary school classroom, we must send children off to a private school on a local assisted places scheme beggars belief. This debate has to have some credibility, but I do not for a moment believe that either the intention or the outcome of what the House of Lords proposes would ensure partnership or give local authorities the discretion to do their job better. The amendments are entirely to do with facilitating a better, broader, more expansive or whatever one wants to call it assisted places scheme.

We have thought about the matter and decided that our original thoughts were better than those of the House of Lords, which wanted to change the position back to what we thought we had changed in the first place. We do not want an assisted places scheme, either local or national, which is why we shall ensure that the amendments are overturned.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 137.

Division No. 338] **[10.25 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy

Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John

Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 140 disagreed to.

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 141, after clause 120, to insert the following new clause—*Payment of school expenses; grant of scholarships, etc—*

" . For section 518 of the Education Act 1996 there shall be substituted—

"Payment of school expenses; grant of scholarships, etc.

518.—(1) A local education authority, for the purpose of enabling persons to take advantage of any educational facilities available to them, may in such circumstances as may be specified in or determined in accordance with regulations—

(a) pay such expenses of children attending community, foundation, voluntary or special schools as may be necessary to enable them to take part in any school activities,

(b) grant scholarships, exhibitions, bursaries and other allowances in respect of persons over compulsory school age.

(2) Regulations may make provision—

(a) for requiring a local education authority to make, in relation to each financial year, a determination relating to the extent to which they propose to exercise their power under subsection (1)(b) in that year; and

(b) for authorising an authority to determine not to exercise that power in a financial year—

(i) generally,

(ii) in such cases as may be prescribed, or

(iii) in such cases as may be determined by the authority." "

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 369 and 394. Amendment No. 141 involves privilege.

Mr. Byers: I ask the House to agree with this group of amendments, most of which are technical, although one gives the Secretary of State the power, by regulations, to allow local education authorities to offer financial support to students if they choose to do so, which is important. It is a good example of the Secretary of State giving LEAs the flexibility to respond to local needs and aspirations as they find them.

The current arrangements for post-16 discretionary awards are failing our young people and need to be replaced. The Government have considered the recommendations of the Lane committee and, as a result of the conclusions of the comprehensive spending review, we have been thinking how we can assist young people post-16 to stay on in full-time education.

Hon. Members will be aware that my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment have confirmed that we shall pilot educational maintenance allowances over the next 12 to 18 months. The amendments will give the Secretary of State the power to do that. They will also allow local education authorities to offer financial support if they feel it is appropriate. I hope that they commend themselves to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to. [Special Entry.]

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 142, after clause 120, to insert the following new clause—*Transfer of assisted places—*

".—(1) In section 3(2) of the Education (Schools) Act 1997 (regulations for purposes of transitional arrangements), after paragraph (f) there shall be added—

"(g) provide for the Secretary of State, in a case where he is satisfied that it is reasonable to do so in view of any particular circumstances relating to a pupil who holds (or has at any time held) an assisted place provided by a school under section 2(1), to authorise another school which is either—

(i) a former participating school, or

(ii) a new school authorised to provide assisted places by virtue of paragraph (f) above,

to provide for the pupil under section 2(1) the assisted place which the first-mentioned school was authorised to provide."

(2) In section 75A(9A) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 (regulations in connection with assisted places)—

(a) the word "and" immediately preceding paragraph (b) shall be omitted; and

(b) after that paragraph there shall be inserted "; and

(c) provide for the Secretary of State, in a case where he is satisfied that it is reasonable to do so in view of any particular circumstances relating to a pupil who holds (or has, at any time since the beginning of the first term of the 1997–98 school year, held) an assisted place at a school under a scheme operated by virtue of subsection (1) above, to authorise another school which is, or is treated as, a participating school to provide for the pupil under such a scheme the assisted place which the first-mentioned school was authorised to provide." "

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 177, 179, 182 to 186, 383 and 386.

Mr. Byers: The amendments cover perhaps only a handful of young people, but they are important. At present, the law on phasing out the assisted places scheme does not permit a child to transfer an assisted place from one school to another. However, there may be pressing reasons why a child should be able to do so. Ministers' attention has been drawn to several cases in which there are family and social reasons why an alternative school is needed.

The amendments would give the Secretary of State a power to agree that an assisted place can be transferred in exceptional circumstances where compassion demands it. The amendments respond to the situations that have been raised with us. We shall operate the discretionary power responsibly and sensibly. We have already

exercised existing discretionary powers in considering 180 applications for transfer. More than half have been agreed to, which shows that we have been fair and reasonable.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Can the Minister confirm that three criteria apply in such cases, and that the Government have exercised discretion reflecting compassion and the needs of the child in only two cases that do not meet those criteria?

Mr. Byers: I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with detailed figures, as I do not have them to hand. I believe that more than two have been agreed on grounds beyond the three specified criteria. Wherever possible, we have sought to be generous and sympathetic, as these amendments are.

Mrs. May: I welcome the amendments. As the Minister has said, a number of young people may benefit from what I must call a U-turn by the Government. Those points were raised by Opposition Members during the debate on the Education (Schools) Bill. The Government set their face implacably against the discretion that their amendments introduce.

I fear that the Government's sudden transformation came not because they had considered the concerns of parents or the education of any of the children involved but because a parent decided to take them to the High Court to challenge the fact that his son was not being allowed to transfer to a second school. The Government decided to pull out of the case and allow the child to transfer to a second school. The case involved junior and senior schools at Ely.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Lady has totally misunderstood the consequences of the amendments, which relate to a child at secondary school who wants to transfer to a different secondary school. That is why we tabled them. The situation that she describes is covered by the Education (Schools) Act 1997. She needs to be clear about the consequences of the amendments, but her contribution so far has shown that she is unclear about them.

10.45 pm

Mrs. May: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention, because it suggests that he does not understand the sort of case that I was citing. The amendment, as I read it, does not refer to the two schools being secondary schools but talks about a pupil transferring to another school to continue the assisted place. That was what was happening in the High Court case of Alastair Sanderson.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Lady is misleading the House—inadvertently, I am sure. I do not think that it is helpful to mention individual cases in the way that she did but that case has now been agreed under the discretion that the Secretary of State already has. Tonight, we are considering a quite different discretion to allow an individual who already has an assisted place to move to another school with it. That is quite different. The case she mentions has nothing to do with the Lords amendment.

Mrs. May: It seems that, every time the Minister speaks on this, he talks about increased flexibility in the Government's provisions for children who have been granted assisted places. It is precisely that point that the amendment addresses and to which I want to refer in respect of other cases. I am sorry that he feels that it is not helpful to refer to individual cases, because it is clear that there are several cases in which people are happy to be quoted on this issue. They have found themselves in difficulty because the Government have exercised discretion on assisted places in some cases, and not in others and are extending their powers in the Lords amendment on such decisions. Those are people who accepted assisted places in 1996 or 1997 on the basis of assurances given them by the Labour party before the general election and subsequently.

Mr. Blunkett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady is out of order. She is dealing with an entirely different set of circumstances. The amendment is to do with the transfer of children who have places but who, because of family circumstances, move to another part of the country and take up another place. I know that, because it was on my instructions that we tabled the amendment to overcome what I considered an unacceptable anomaly.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Let me answer the first point of order. I shall not be long in coming back to the hon. Gentleman.

There is an ambiguity in the mind of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). It is for Ministers to put her right. She is raising a matter and is entitled to an explanation. If the Minister feels that a full and proper explanation has been given, we shall have to end it at that.

Mr. St. Aubyn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the Secretary of State issues instructions to his officials to draft a new clause, but they give it a wider ambit that permits a wider debate, is it in order for the Secretary of State to try to limit the debate in the House to the clause that he originally intended to table, but clearly failed to do?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is confusing the issue. I think that my ruling was excellent. It was a first-class ruling.

Mrs. May: Your rulings are always excellent, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In order to allay your concerns and any concerns held by Ministers, I should say that my remarks are pertinent to the Lords amendment. It relates to the circumstances in which a pupil seeks to move from one school to another, but to transfer his assisted place. It was interesting that the Secretary of State rose to say that I was out of order before he had heard about the cases. Either he is telepathic or he knows well the concerns that have been raised by parents.

The cases that I was starting to quote were instances in which individuals believed that they had places at schools which were defined as all-through schools, which the Labour party before the election told them would be honoured. The Secretary of State, in a letter, sent—

[Mrs. May]

Mr. Blunkett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady is confusing vertical with horizontal. The amendment deals with transfer across. She is referring to transfer upwards.

Mrs. Browning: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Everyone wants to raise a point of order. I have to reply to the point of order. Let me say to the Minister that those are matters for debate.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. After the hon. Member for Maidenhead has said her piece, I will happily call either the Secretary of State or the Minister to reply to her. That is the way that things are done in the House. The Minister can then rebut her argument. So far, her argument has not been out of order. If it had been out of order, I would have told her so.

Mrs. Browning: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I seek your assistance? Whatever the Secretary of State may wish to say in response to my hon. Friend, it would be extremely helpful if she could be allowed to complete what she has to say. I am finding it extremely frustrating. Just as I am beginning to follow her line of reasoning, the Secretary of State intervenes to cut her off. May I ask you to assist the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am assisting the House. I call the hon. Member for Maidenhead.

Mrs. May: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I trust that I shall be able to reach the question that I wish to ask the Government on the basis of the cases to which I have referred. It is interesting that the Secretary of State finds such need to stand up and try to break off the argument on this issue. It suggests a certain sensitivity on his part.

I was about to refer—this is part of the question that I wish to ask the Secretary of State or the Minister—to a letter that the Secretary of State sent out on 10 March this year to a Mrs. Teed in Maidstone in Kent. He made it clear that there was—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps if I may be allowed to complete the argument, the Secretary of State or the Minister will be able to say whether the issue is relevant. In that letter, the Secretary of State talked about vertical schooling, in the sense that he said to Mrs. Teed:

"Where there was provision of an 'all through' school and where there had been a clear promise of a place through to the age of 18, we have agreed to honour that promise."

Parents and grandparents are being told that that promise will not be honoured—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must say to the Minister that the hon. Lady has the Floor. She is the only one who is going to address the Chamber at this moment.

Mrs. May: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the Secretary of State—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs. May: If the Secretary of State could have a little patience, I was almost at the point—

Mr. David Jamieson (Plymouth, Devonport): Get on with it.

Mrs. May: If the Government Whip wants me to get on, he should keep his Secretary of State from constantly standing up.

In his letter of 10 March, the Secretary of State said that the Government would honour the provision of an all-through school place where it had been promised through to the age of 18, but parents have discovered that those places are not being honoured. They are being told that the senior school of the school in which their child has been given a junior school place constitutes a separate school, and that it is not an all-through place.

The point is that the amendment gives the Secretary of State a power of discretion in those cases where a child wishes to transfer an assisted place from one school to another. My question, which I could have asked several minutes ago had the Secretary of State allowed me the opportunity to do so, is this. Is it possible for those parents who have written to me—having written several times to the Secretary of State, having checked the Labour party's policy when it was in opposition and having had that assurance from the Secretary of State, but having found that the all-through places are not being honoured because the schools are now defined as being separate schools—to ask the Secretary of State to exercise his discretion under the new powers given in the amendment, which the Government introduced in the House of Lords, which the Lords passed and which the Government now claim gives them extra flexibility—which it does; there has been a U-turn from the position taken last summer when what became the Education (Schools) Act 1987 went through the House—because the DfEE has now defined the school in which the place was given as being two separate schools? I should tell the Secretary of State that the amendment at which I am looking makes no reference to horizontal transfer, but only to transfer to another school under the assisted places scheme.

Parents and children are being disappointed because they trusted Labour's word when it was in opposition, but they have found that that word, that promise, that pledge, to them has been broken. Children who thought that they had a school place through to the age of 18 have had, or are about to have, that place taken away at the age of 11. Under the Lords amendment, which the Government tabled, the Secretary of State has extra discretion in respect of the operation of the assisted places scheme and the phasing out of that scheme. Will he now confirm that the Government will go away, consider the Lords

amendment in relation to the cases raised by parents who are greatly concerned about what is happening to their children because of the Government's broken pledges, and decide that those people who were given clear pledges by the Government will now have those pledges honoured at last?

Mr. Byers: I hope that I shall be able to clarify the position for the benefit of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). Amendment No. 142 is the substantive amendment in this group, and I had thought that, when introducing the debate on the amendment, I had identified the circumstances in which the Secretary of State intended to exercise the new discretion that the amendment would give him.

What we said—it was said in the House of Lords as well, and I commend the comments made on this matter when the Government moved the amendment there—is that the specific situation that we have in mind is where a transfer will be made, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State says, horizontally—in other words, a child who already has an assisted place, perhaps for family reasons, needs to transfer to another school. In such circumstances, we felt it would be appropriate to have a discretion to continue that assisted place.

Amendment No. 142 is an enabling provision; it creates a new discretionary power. We shall have to produce regulations to show how we intend to exercise that power, and I had thought that I had already illustrated the circumstances in which we would exercise it. It is restricted solely to the circumstances I have described. One or two Conservative Members and some of my hon. Friends who are not currently in the Chamber have raised constituency cases which we have considered. In the light of those cases, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agreed that the amendment should be tabled in the House of Lords. That is a very good demonstration of how, away from the fiery rhetoric of the Chamber, we act in response to particular cases to meet the needs of individual children.

This evening, we have had a rerun of the debate that we had last summer when we passed the Education (Schools) Act 1997. The Government's commitment to the phasing out of the assisted places scheme was made crystal clear in the run-up to the last election. Chapter and verse was given. Letters written by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 10 March do not countermand what was said in the run-up to the election, when our position was made clear.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister give way?

11 pm

Mr. Byers: No, because we have debated this matter on numerous occasions and the hon. Gentleman brings nothing new to the argument.

The House is aware of the arguments. We have the opportunity this evening to agree with the Lords amendment that will give the Secretary of State a discretionary power to use in accordance with regulations to apply to a small number of cases, in which, for compassionate reasons, young people should be allowed to move school and keep their assisted place. That makes sense. The Government are acting reasonably and compassionately, and I hope that, in that spirit, the House will agree to the amendment.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 122

DISSOLUTION OF FUNDING AGENCY FOR SCHOOLS

Lords amendment: No. 143, in page 94, line 22, after ("Agency") insert

("to which subsection (5) applies")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 152, 170 to 174, 181, 351, 354, 355, 362 to 366, 368, 370 to 373, 376 to 382, 384, 385, 387, 390, 391, 393, 395, 396 and 398 to 403.

Mr. Byers: There will be considerably less passion in relation to this group of amendments. These are the kind of amendments that we have at the end of proceedings on a Bill. They are mainly technical, define various consequential measures and deal with repeals and other measures necessary as a result of the Bill's passage through the House of Lords. I hope that with limited debate, the House will be able to agree with the Lords amendments.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 144 to 152 agreed to.

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 153, after clause 129, to insert the following new clause—*Minor authorities—*

("Construction

.—(1) For the purposes of this Act a maintained school serves an area for which there are one or more minor authorities if the area served by the school is—

(a) a parish or community;

(b) an area in England which is not within a parish and is not situated in—

(i) a county for which there is no council, or

(ii) a county in which there are no district councils; or

(c) an area comprising two or more areas each of which falls within paragraph (a) or (b).

(2) Where the area served by the school is a parish—

(a) the parish council (if there is one), or

(b) the parish meeting (if there is no parish council),

is the minor authority in relation to the school.

(3) Where the area served by the school is a community, the community council is the minor authority in relation to the school.

(4) Where the area served by the school is an area falling within subsection (1)(b), any district council for the whole or part of the area is a minor authority in relation to the school.

(5) Where the area served by the school is an area falling within subsection (1)(c), each of the relevant authorities is a minor authority in relation to the school.

(6) In subsection (5) "the relevant authorities" means the bodies which, if the two or more constituent areas referred to in subsection (1)(c) were taken separately, would be minor authorities in relation to the school.

(7) References in this section to the area served by a school are references to the area appearing to the local education authority to be served by the school.")

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 168 and 178,

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Lords amendments Nos. 237 to 240 and the Government motions to disagree thereto, and Lords amendment No. 244 and the Government amendment in lieu.

Mr. Byers: We agree with the Lords in amendments Nos. 153, 168 and 178, which make technical changes on minor authority provisions, and complement the Government amendment. I urge the House to disagree with amendments Nos. 238, 239, 240 and 244 on minor authority representation on school governing bodies. We have tabled our own amendments, which we believe meet the concerns that were expressed on this issue by the House of Lords.

Minor authorities have been campaigning for the automatic right to representation on community and voluntary primary school governing bodies. The Government's amendment meets those concerns. When a school serves more than one minor authority area, the governing body will retain the right to decide which minor authority should be represented. The key difference is that there must be a minor authority representative on the governing body.

In line with the amendment, we propose to make an additional co-opted place available for the minor authority nominee. However, we believe that the minor authority representation should continue through a co-opted member of the school governing body. Our amendment provides for a minor authority nominee to be an additional governor appointed by the existing school governors, who are not co-opted.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I must confess to ignorance in this matter, so perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to enlighten me. Is there a limit to the size of governing bodies? That is important, because some minor authorities will have difficulty finding people to shoulder the responsibility of being a governor. We certainly do not want to arrive at a situation where the space is effectively vacant but governing bodies are statutorily obliged to provide it.

Mr. Byers: No. Minor authorities will have to nominate individuals, and it will then be for the individual school governing body to decide who should be co-opted on to that governing body. We have taken the view that that should occur via a co-option route rather than by booking up one of the places on the existing school governing body. That would have the consequence to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

This is a new mechanism, which is already in the Bill, for authorising or requiring additional co-opted governors who are nominated by particular categories of persons in specified circumstances. We are building on a provision that is already in the Bill. When schools serve more than one minor authority area—there are occasions when they do—this measure has the significant advantage of allowing the governing body to decide who the appropriate minor authority representative should be. We believe that it is right for the school to make that decision as it is in the best position to know who can best serve, the interests of the minor authority locally.

We have listened to the concerns of minor authorities and to concerns expressed in the House of Lords. I believe that the Government amendment will ensure that minor authorities get the place that is reserved for them, which was their key objective. We believe that the school governing body should select the minor authority representative. We do not agree with the view expressed in another place that the minor authority representative should automatically and exclusively be from the minor authority where the school is located. Many schools may be located just outside the area from where the majority of children come. In those circumstances, a minor authority that is responsible for the well-being of those children will feel aggrieved if the place is reserved solely for the minor authority where the school is located.

The amendment tabled by the Government in the House of Lords allows all minor authorities to submit names to be considered by the school governing body. It will then be for the school governing body to identify which of the minor authority nominees should take up the co-opted position on the school governing body. We believe that that is a sensible approach. It builds on the approach taken in the House of Lords, but in a more practical and effective manner. It will work in practice.

Mr. Luff: Will a school be obliged to take a nomination, if one is forthcoming, from a minor authority, or will it have the discretion to say, "No; we don't like this nomination and we will not have a minor authority representative"?

Mr. Byers: In line with the amendments tabled in the House of Lords and the Government amendment before us, the minor authority will be able to nominate an individual, and there will be a requirement on the school governing body to select one of those nominated by the minor authority. That is how we can meet the objective to have a minor authority place on a primary school governing body. The governing body will be required to co-opt one of the individuals nominated by the minor authorities.

We feel that the Government amendment tabled tonight meets the concerns expressed in another place, and those expressed by many town and parish councils throughout the country, which value the fact that they have representatives on primary school governing bodies. We have listened to representations from many hon. Members. I have written literally hundreds of letters on the issue. There has been a very effective lobbying campaign, without employing lobbyists as such. Probably there is a lesson there for many people—but I must be careful what we say on these issues.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Is the hon. Gentleman on message?

Mr. Byers: No, my pager has not started vibrating on my waistband.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It will.

Mr. Byers: We do have 24-hour monitoring, so the hon. Gentleman may well be right. I believe that I was responsible for introducing that monitoring, so I must be careful what I say.

We believe that the amendment tabled by the Government meets the concerns that have been expressed, to which hon. Members on both sides of the House

have drawn our attention. We have listened to those representations. I hope that the House can agree with the amendment that has been tabled tonight, which we believe will build on the decisions taken in the House of Lords.

Mr. Key: Regrettably, I am not convinced by what the Minister has just told the House. I had hoped, as I watched the Bill's progress through the other place, that I would be convinced.

As recently as yesterday, I received a telephone call from the chairman of the Wiltshire association of local councils. I must declare an interest, in that I have the honour to be the president of that association. On Friday, in Devizes town hall, we shall have our annual general meeting, for which this subject is an agenda item.

I have been asked to express at that meeting the opinion, which I share, that there is still a tremendous amount of disquiet among parish and town councils about the fact that the tradition that we are discussing has been stood on its head for no apparent reason. In fact, many of us believe that the Government sleep-walked into this without realising what was happening, and that, when they noticed, they tried to dig their way out. They dug their way out with a fudge, and that fudge simply will not do. I regret that, but I shall report to the Wiltshire association of local councils what has happened in the House tonight, and let the Minister know what it decides.

I regret very much that, at this late hour, at this late stage of the Bill's passage, it has not been possible for the Government to abide by the well-tried maxim, "If it ain't bust, don't fix it."

Mr. Willis: We welcome the movement that the Government have made to recognise the genuine concerns, especially of parish councils, about their automatic representation on governing bodies, especially small village schools. For instance, in my constituency, in Knaresborough, the town council has nomination rights on the governing body of King James school. It values those rights very greatly.

The village where I live includes Rufforth primary school, where I was a governor and the chair of governors for many years. It is a very small school, with fewer than 40 students. The parish council has a very close relationship with it. At times, money was hard to come by—although there will be rejoicing in the streets tonight, in the street party, with all the new money going into the school. When money was hard to come by, when the school needed security lights because equipment was constantly stolen, the parish council came to the rescue. *[Interruption.]* It was the only one that was not charge-capped. The parish council had a representative on the governing body. The governing body was able to argue its case before the parish council, and the latter was able to help.

The Department has recently given King James school, Knaresborough, technology school status. The bid for technology school status was based partly on the fact that the town council of Knaresborough was prepared to make a significant donation from local taxes to support the school.

Those are two excellent examples of the sort of relationship that exists. The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) is right—if it is not broken, why should the Government fix it? It has worked extremely well, especially in rural areas. People have prized the relationship between the parish or town council and their local schools, and we want it to be preserved.

Amendment No. 153, which was introduced in the Lords, was an excellent amendment. It met the concerns of the House. We do not see why, simply because the Government did not agree with it in the first place, they should not accept it. It would be extremely gracious at this late hour, on the last group of amendments, if the Secretary of State came to the Dispatch Box and said that the matter was not worth fighting over and that the Government would concede.

Thousands of parish councillors have lobbied through their associations. Like the hon. Member for Salisbury, my local association has lobbied me. This is the only issue on which the Yorkshire association of local councils has lobbied me over the past year—the association still thinks that I am a Conservative. When I addressed its conference in Scarborough recently, it was the one major issue about which the association felt strongly.

The need for flexibility must be recognised. The Minister is right to say that we need flexibility on these matters, but his approach is wrong. He is saying, in effect, that there could be nominations from a number of parish councils for the one place that is available, and the school would then choose. Is that the sort of democracy about which we are talking? If the parish councils had to get together to make that one nomination, as has happened in the past, that would be real local democracy working to choose the best person.

I hope that the Minister will agree that, on this occasion, he has got it slightly wrong, and that it would be better to allow Lords amendment No. 153 to proceed.

11.15 pm

Mrs. Browning: I hope that the Minister listened carefully to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). Like him, I am concerned that, although the Minister seems to have made a concession tonight, it is not clear how or why the Government have changed their mind. When we discussed in Committee an amendment similar to the Lords amendment, it was clear that the Government's policy was driven by different priorities. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who led for the Government in the debate, stated:

"We shall . . . encourage local authorities to consider using one of their appointees from a minor authority if they have room to do so."

He also said:

"I agree that in some circumstances, it may be appropriate for LEAs to appoint minor authority nominees as their representatives—to use up their allocation by bringing on parish, town or community council representatives."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 10 February 1998; c. 427-28.]

It was clearly in the Government's mind in Standing Committee that that was to be just a sopping-up of spare places at an LEA's behest, if it happened to have any. The Under-Secretary said that parish and town councillors would have to earn their place, which caused great disquiet and offence among parish councillors.

In my constituency of Tiverton and Honiton, we have scattered rural communities with parish councils that for generations have had a close working relationship with the local village primary school.

[Mrs. Browning]

I am sorry that the Minister stated in his opening remarks that he would not accept amendments Nos. 238, 239 and 240. It has never been clear how the Government arrived at their policy. Originally we suggested that it was an omission, but it is evidently a deliberate policy to remove from locally democratically elected representatives at town and parish level a relationship with their local schools that has existed for generations and is valued in the community where it exists.

When the Minister reached his decision about the policy, why did he not follow customary practice and organise a consultation? It came as a shock and a blow to parish and town councils to learn that the Government intended to remove arbitrarily their right to represent their local councils, particularly in the case of rural primary schools.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I may be wrong, but I think that the hon. Lady's area—like mine in Somerset—has a system of community designation, which applies to community schools even at primary level. Does she agree that there is something very curious about having a community designation for a school but not having the community represented on the governing body? That close relationship needs to be maintained if community designation is to mean anything.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Indeed, the Secretary of State said in the introduction to his White Paper:

"Partnership for change means commitment from everyone, from the family and from the wider community".

As the hon. Gentleman has just said, the parish council and the village school are at the heart of small rural parishes and communities: indeed, it could be said that the whole community revolves around them. That has been accepted for generations.

Although the Minister has appeared to make a few concessions as a result of the Lords amendments, I ask him to look again at the amendments that we are discussing. If his Government are serious about the role of rural communities and the role of democratic representation at the lowest level in such communities, he must surely see that for the Government to step in and wipe away democratic representation that has existed for generations is an act of arrogance that will not be forgiven or forgotten—certainly not in the rural communities in my constituency.

Mrs. May: The Government have produced what they claim to be concessions in relation to some of the amendments. We are pleased that they have been willing to move some distance on the issue of minor authority representation on governing bodies, but—as has others have pointed out—they have not moved far enough.

I shall want to test the House's opinion on the motion to disagree with Lords amendments Nos. 237 to 240, which would reinstate the right of a parish or town council to have a representative on the local governing body. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) made clear, the Government opposed that right in Committee. Considerable offence was caused by the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), when he said that, in future, representation must be earned. The implication was that parish council representatives on governing bodies had been "passengers"—that they had not taken their role seriously, and had not contributed to their local communities.

Like many other hon. Members, I have been contacted by parish council organisations, and, indeed, by parish councils in my constituency. Cox Green parish council, for example, referred to

"an important connection within the local community".

Wargrave parish council wrote:

"Local schools are an important part of the community and this link ensures that the community can participate in the decision making of each governing body."

Ruscombe parish council said:

"the local Parish Councils have the feelings of the community at heart, from ground level, and their views should have a voice."

Woodley town council said:

"Schools in Woodley play a key role in the community and the Town Council has an opportunity to offer support on many issues through its nominated governors."

Sonning parish council said:

"The Council believes that by having representatives on the governing body it is in a unique position to assist the school in achieving many of its aims."

Those councils have earned the right to be represented on governing bodies. They earn it at every governing body meeting that they attend. They earn it through their contributions to the life of local schools. They earn it through the contribution that their position on the school governing body makes to the life of the local community. That is important for local communities.

The Government's initial proposal to abandon the right of parish councils to an appointed position on governing bodies was another blow aimed at our village and rural communities throughout the country, like so many others that we have seen from the Government. They do not understand local communities, as their amendments show. They have moved some way, but they have not gone as far as they need to on reinstating the current right that has been exercised well in villages and towns throughout the country. That link is an important element at the heart of our local communities. It should stay in its entirety in the way in which it has been operating for generations.

The right of parish and town councils to representation on school governing bodies enables them to play an important role at the heart of their community, together with their local schools, and should be reinstated. That is why I wish to divide the House on the Government's disagreement with the Lords amendments.

Mr. Byers: It might help the House if I go through some facts behind the amendments. We need to be clear about the consequences of not agreeing with the Government motions. The Opposition amendments carried in the House of Lords against Government advice would remove rights currently enjoyed by hundreds of minor authorities. They would give nomination rights only to the minor authority in which the school was located. All other minor authorities, which are currently involved in a joint appointment of a minor authority representative, would be denied that role. It is untrue to say that the Conservatives are protecting the interests of

town and parish councils throughout the country. They want to deny involvement to hundreds of town and parish councils in deciding who should be on governing bodies.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): So do the Government.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman clearly has not read our amendment, which will allow minor authorities to nominate a governor. There will be a minor authority entitlement for every school. Our definition of parish and town councils includes Welsh community councils, which the amendments carried by the Conservatives in the House of Lords do not. Any hon. Member who votes against disagreeing with amendments Nos. 237 to 240, on which I understand that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) will seek a vote, will be voting to deny Welsh community councils a place on primary school governing bodies. The Liberal Democrats should be particularly aware of that. I think that they were about to support the Conservatives.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) say that it was important that minor authorities should decide who their representatives should be. It is true that minor authorities can agree whom they should nominate, but, at the moment, if they fail to do so, which does happen, the Secretary of State decides. If agreement is not reached, surely it is far better that the school governing body decides. That is exactly what the Government amendment proposes.

Mr. Don Foster: I am grateful to the Minister for his explanation; I wish that he had made it very much earlier. Have I understood correctly that, under the Government amendment, it is possible for more than one minor authority to agree on the single preferred nomination, and that that would have to be accepted by the school?

11.30 pm

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to be able to confirm that that will be so. Such a nomination will be entitled to a minor authority place on the school governing body. If only one nominee comes forward on behalf of those minor authorities, that will be the place that will be co-opted on to the school governing body. The Government have thought long and hard about the proposals before the House.

Mrs. May: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byers: I should be delighted to try to enlighten the hon. Lady further.

Mrs. May: The answer that the Minister has just given goes against—if I heard him correctly—what he said earlier. If two minor authorities do not agree a single nomination, is it not up to the school to determine which of the minor authorities will have the place on the governing body—not the minor authorities themselves?

Mr. Byers: I am afraid that this is restating the obvious. If the minor authorities cannot agree, someone has to decide on their behalf. At the moment, the Secretary of State decides. The Lords amendments would allow that to continue. I am sorry, that is not correct; minor authorities can no longer nominate their own people. The nomination is left to the minor authority where the school is situated. The Government motions will allow minor authorities to agree who their nominees should be. If agreement is reached, the nominated person will take a place on the school governing body. If agreement is not reached, it will be for the school governing body to select who that nominee should be.

Mr. Don Foster: I apologise for interrupting the Minister for a second time. He gave me a clear explanation a minute ago. I draw his attention specifically to the proposed sub-paragraph (4) in the Government amendment in lieu, which states:

"Where any such school serves an area for which there are two or more minor authorities, the relevant governors shall, for the purposes of the appointment of any such co-opted governor, seek nominations from such one or more of those authorities as the governors think fit."

That seems to be in marked contrast to his response a few minutes ago.

Mr. Byers: No, it will be for the minor authorities to respond to the governing body's invitation to nominate. If there is agreement among the minor authorities, one nominee will come forward, and they will be the person who will be entitled to sit on the school governing body.

The House needs to be clear that the choice is either to agree with amendments from the House of Lords or to agree with the amendment and motions tabled by the Government. Hon. Members who vote to agree with the House of Lords will be denying a place for Welsh community councils and for hundreds of town and parish councils. When the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) goes to his meeting in Devizes on Friday evening, I think that he will find that town and district councils welcome the Government motions, and are deeply unhappy about the proposals of Conservatives in the House of Lords.

These are reasoned and responsible proposals that provide an entitlement for minor authorities on a school governing body. They do not deny a role for literally hundreds of town and parish councils, as the Conservative proposals would. On that basis, I commend the motions and Government amendments to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 154 to 197 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 198 disagreed to, and Government amendments (a) to (c) to the words so restored agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 199 disagreed to, and Government amendment to the words so restored agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 200 to 236 agreed to.

Schedule 9

CONSTITUTION OF GOVERNING BODIES

Lords amendment: No. 237, in page 138, line 20, at end insert—

("*Minor authority governor*

. In this Schedule "minor authority governor" means a governor appointed by the town or parish council or parish meeting which covers the locality of any community primary school, any voluntary controlled primary school or any voluntary aided primary school.")

Motion made, and Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Byers.]*

The House divided: Ayes 275, Noes 130.

Division No. 339] **[11.36 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Horne Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Opik, Lembit
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey

Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 238 to 240 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 241 to 243 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 244 disagreed to.

Government amendment in lieu of Lords amendments Nos. 237 to 240 and 244 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 245 to 411 agreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to certain of their amendments to the Bill: Mr. Stephen Byers, Mr. Stephen Day, Mr. David Jamieson, Mrs. Theresa May and Ms Rachel Squire; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Teaching and Higher Education Bill *[Lords]*

Lords amendment considered.

Clause 20

TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Lords amendment in lieu of an amendment to which the Commons have disagreed: in page 15, line 40, at end insert—

("(4) The Secretary of State shall, not later than six months after the passing of this Act, appoint an independent body to review the arrangements for England and Wales relating to the payment of grants in respect of fees payable in connection with attendance on the final honours year of first degree courses at higher education institutions in Scotland.

(5) The Secretary of State shall invite—

(a) the Scottish higher education principals,

(b) the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, and

(c) such other bodies as he considers appropriate,

to make representations to the body established under subsection (4); and the report of that body shall be laid before each House of Parliament not later than 1st April 2000.

(6) If that body recommends that the arrangements referred to in subsection (4) should be modified in accordance with this subsection, the Secretary of State may modify those arrangements so as to secure that they are no less favourable than the arrangements made by regulations under section 73(f) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 for the payment of allowances in respect of fees payable as mentioned in subsection (4).

(7) In subsections (4) and (6) any reference to the arrangements for England and Wales is a reference to arrangements made either under the Education Act 1962 or under section 19 of this Act.")

11.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I inform the House that the Lords amendment in lieu of the words so left out of the Bill involves privilege.

Dr. Howells: I pay tribute to the constructive approach adopted by the other place yesterday in seeking a resolution to the disagreement between the two Houses. That approach was shown by peers of all parties, and I hope that it will be replicated here.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Sweetness and light.

Dr. Howells: It is always sweetness and light from me.

We have discussed many times the arrangements for financial support for fees for students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the fourth or final year of an honours degree course in Scotland. When the House last considered the Bill, on Monday evening, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave an undertaking, with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland, to set up an independent review of those arrangements early next year.

Following a helpful proposal from the Liberal Democrats in another place, my noble Friend Baroness Blackstone tabled the amendment yesterday to give effect to the independent review proposed by my right hon. Friend. The amendment requires the Secretary of State to set up an independent body within six months of enacting the Bill. Its report is to be laid before both Houses of Parliament by 1 April 2000. In practice, as my right hon. Friend made clear on Sunday, we expect the review to take place early next year. That is in line with our stated intention to monitor the effect of implementing the new policy of means testing grants for tuition fees.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Has my hon. Friend a date for the choice of a chairman for the review body?

Dr. Howells: No. The composition of the committee has not yet been agreed by the House, but, as soon as it is, we shall seek an appropriate chair extremely quickly.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): The Minister said that the report would be laid before both Houses of this Parliament, but responsibility for higher education in Scotland will lie with the Scottish Parliament. Will the report be laid before the Scottish Parliament? Who will be in charge of the results of the review?

Dr. Howells: I take it that that would be a decision at that time for the people of Scotland. Until then, we have to lay before this Parliament the details of the amendment, and that is what I am trying to do. I do not intend to engage in a constitutional debate with anybody at this time of night.

The amendment places a duty on the Secretary of State to invite representations from the parties most closely concerned, most notably the principals of Scottish higher education institutions and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, but also such other bodies as he considers appropriate, perhaps including political parties. The bodies invited to make representations will no doubt include the full range of interests, including, of course, students. However, it will be open to anyone, including any individual who has a relevant interest in the matter, to make representations to the review body.

We intend the review to be fully independent. Of course, it will be for the body itself to decide how to conduct its business, but clearly its purpose will be to review the arrangements for fee support for students in the fourth or final honours year of first degree courses at higher education institutions in Scotland. We envisage that the review will want to take particular account of evidence on applications and admissions to four-year and longer courses in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom in 1998–99 and the early evidence on applications to such courses for 1999–2000. That will allow for all the evidence to be assessed, including the impact on Scottish universities.

As my noble Friend Baroness Blackstone made clear yesterday, it will be a serious and fully independent review. We believe that it offers a way forward through the impasse that we were facing in the other place, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Willetts: This may be the end of the intense debate in both Houses on this subject—we do not have the same

intensity tonight because, thank heavens, a compromise has been reached, and I will not delay the House with a post-match analysis of exactly how that happened.

It is a pleasure to have the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells) speaking on this subject. Perhaps if he had been handling it, in place of the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, we would not have got into quite such a mess.

Now that the Under-Secretary of State is here, perhaps he can clarify three points. First, will he say what he means by the independence of the body? We understand the assurances that have been given on independence, and it would be helpful to know how, for example, he will set about selecting the chairman, as there was a pertinent intervention on that point. If he can tell us any more about the chairman, the composition and the proposals for setting up the body, we shall be grateful.

Secondly, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will repeat the assurance given in the House of Lords by Baroness Blackstone, which was crucial in securing the compromise, that, even though the amendment stated that the Secretary of State "may" change the regulations, in practice

"this will be about the strongest 'may' that Members of your Lordships' House have ever seen . . . I reiterate that this is a very strong 'may'."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 127-28.]

If the Minister catches your eye again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will he repeat the words that had such an effect in the debate in the other place and which are so important? They establish that the Secretary of State will not merely have a theoretical power to deal with the Scottish anomaly. If the independent commission shows—as we and hon. Members representing many other parties believe that it will—that the anomaly is affecting student applications to Scottish universities, in the light of the words used by the Minister in the House of Lords we will regard the Government as under a clear moral obligation to act on that evidence.

Finally, can the Minister confirm that the issue remains live, because he has the power—it will be in the statute—to end the Scottish anomaly? If evidence is compelling that it is affecting behaviour, as we fear it will, and if the universities and students of Scotland carry on campaigning on the issue, the amendment will give him the power to get rid of that anomaly.

Mr. Dalyell: I have no doubt that the Minister, like the Secretary of State, has acted in good faith. It is clear from what he said tonight, and from what the Secretary of State said to a group meeting, that they are serious. However, may I impress on the Minister that the matter is urgent? At the university of Dundee, a distinguished university with five-star ratings for biochemistry and other subjects, applications are down by 14 per cent. It is late, so I will say no more.

12 midnight

Mr. Willis: The Liberal Democrats are also pleased that common sense has prevailed, and that some of what we want has been achieved. The amendment does not go far enough, and we would rather that an unacceptable proposal had been defeated. However, once Lord Cranborne had made it clear that Conservative peers were not prepared to defeat the Government, a settlement had to be found, and an honourable settlement was found. The universities—in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom—required certainty before the summer recess about how to deal with fees in October. At least they can now begin to plan.

The whole battle was entirely unnecessary. If the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, had not taken such an aggressive stance in and out of the House, the matter could have been settled some time ago. There was no reason why we could not have included the amendment on Report when it became clear that the Scottish question would not be easily resolved.

The Minister's opposition became more and more bizarre as time went on. He became more and more desperate, attacking vice-chancellors and rich English students. He accused Scottish universities of running a bogus system. When all else failed, we had to resort to the constitution. Tonight, the Minister is undoubtedly in Scotland, having a wee dram and relaxing while the rest of us deal with the matter.

I cannot believe that the committee that will hear evidence will do anything other than confirm the feelings of the House and of the other place that the Government's proposal would do irreparable damage to the structure of Scottish universities, particularly by affecting the broad spectrum of students who go to Scotland from England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the rest of the European Union. Lord Callaghan made the most telling remark yesterday, when he told Baroness Blackstone that, if the committee says that the proposal will do damage, the Government had better listen. We hope that that message has got through, and that whoever replaces the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office in the reshuffle will be a listening Minister.

Mr. Welsh: It is after the midnight hour, and the tuition fees issue is sneaking through late at night after all the votes and speeches. Perhaps that is appropriate.

I have asked before that the situation be monitored because I was concerned about it. The Government's view meets that need, although it comes after the damage was done. I should prefer the tuition fees measures to be dropped altogether, a case that I have argued consistently. However, the Government have been reduced to offering us a review, which is better than nothing. I am glad to say that the issue will eventually be decided by the new Scottish Parliament.

Will the review be extended to cover further as well as higher education? The effects on applications will be felt throughout the system. If the Government are going to the trouble of gathering personnel, giving administrative back-up and taking evidence from all over Scotland, why not extend the review's scope to cover the effect of student loans on admissions and the lives of students? All those factors will be at play in Scotland's education system because of the Government's policy.

I maintain my view that the Government are fundamentally wrong on the issue. They are out of step with people in Scottish education and with the general public in Scotland. Only time will tell who is right and who is wrong. I hope that no damage will be done to Scotland's higher education system. I remain opposed to this unnecessary discrimination by the Government against English, Northern Irish and Welsh students who

[Mr. Welsh]

want to do Scottish honours degree courses. Happily, the issue will be passed to the new Scottish Parliament, whose decision will be final. I am sure that it will be fairer and more enlightened in wishing to end such discrimination. The issue should never have arisen. A sensible Government would never have allowed it to happen.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Compromise is not an activity in which Ulster Unionists readily engage, but I am happy to welcome this solution on behalf of my colleagues. I am confident that those who engage in the review will eventually arrive at a solution that we could have arrived at a long time ago.

Mr. Dalyell: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm the rumour that it is likely that a court case will be initiated by people in Belfast angry that they will have to pay £1,000 more than those coming from Dublin?

Mr. Beggs: The hon. Gentleman makes an appropriate intervention. With the ease of access to legal aid that has been abused so well in Northern Ireland, such litigation is not unlikely. I am confident that the review will reach a satisfactory conclusion that will ensure that students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland are treated equitably compared with those in Scotland. I await the outcome of the review.

Dr. Howells: I found the comments of the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) helpful and constructive, as were those of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and, in their way, the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh). I do not think that, by any means, we can say that this is being sneaked through. It may be late, but that is to do with the daft way in which the House works. It is nothing to do with a lack of debate. As the hon. Member for Havant said, the subject has been debated more intensely than any other that I can recall in recent times.

I sense from what was said not only a constructive attitude but a determination to get it right. We will try to get the committee right and to make it representative, and we will try to do it quickly. That is vital.

Mr. Dalyell: Before litigation, if possible.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) is not aware yet that litigation hangs over us like a sword, so I shall wait until he tells me before I start worrying about it.

The key words are "may" and "shall". Lord Callaghan was right. Any Government who did not listen to the recommendations of the committee which will look seriously at what is, after all, revolutionary legislation, and its effects, would rightly be condemned as insensitive and uncaring, and we would deserve those titles. *[Interruption.]* We will accept it. We will not be tied to anything, because no Government should agree to that. We will look very closely at the recommendations of any committee, and we will take it seriously.

Lords amendment agreed to. [Special Entry.].

NORTHERN IRELAND BILL

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Northern Ireland Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

Edgar Fernandes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

12.10 am

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I thank you for allowing me to raise in the House the tragic case of Edgar Fernandes, a young British citizen who met his death in mysterious circumstances in Turkey. I also want to highlight the plight of families involved in tracing their loved ones.

Hon. Members may remember the extensive media coverage of the disappearance of Edgar Fernandes, who went missing in Turkey in April. They may also remember the outrage that followed the discovery of Edgar's body in a Turkish mortuary a full month after he had disappeared.

Edgar was a librarian at Hackney council who grew up in my constituency in Leicester, where his mother and father still live, although he was born in Kenya and lived for a short while in Goa. He was murdered in Turkey. The man suspected of carrying out his murder was then arrested in Malta after Edgar's passport had been used to enter Bulgaria and Greece. Edgar's tragedy is therefore a truly international story. In fact, had it not happened, it could easily have been dismissed as a work of fiction.

I was approached by his family to take up his case. His local Member of Parliament at the time of his death was my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the Secretary of State for Health. My right hon. Friend has asked to be associated with everything that has been done on behalf of the family.

Edgar was a very popular and gentle person, supported by his strong and closely knit family—his two brothers and three sisters—as well as a huge network of friends. The grief at his death was widespread. Numerous people paid tributes at his funeral and, as a result of public demand, a book of condolence was opened at the library where he worked. I want to pay tribute tonight to the painstaking and relentless campaign that Edgar's family and friends have mounted in order to obtain justice. May I acknowledge the love and devotion of his brothers and sisters—Genny, Matthias, Mary, Fatima and Mario—and of Tony Fernandes, Krishna Maharaj, Sophia and Andy Mesfin, Jerome Carasco, Chris Broadhead and Evelyn Teichmann.

I want tonight to highlight the reasons why the family feel that they must get more support from the authorities, especially as more and more Britons now go abroad on holiday. Britons travel abroad in the expectation that they will be protected and that, if they are attacked or murdered, the authorities in those countries will take appropriate action. The Fernandes family have conducted a mammoth investigation to trace the suspect and to uncover what happened to Edgar. In fact, almost all the evidence in the case has been carefully uncovered by the family and has been passed to Turkish Interpol, the British embassy in Turkey and the Foreign Office.

Edgar left for a week's holiday to Turkey on 8 April 1998. When he failed to return, his family alerted his local police station in Camden. The police officer suspected that he had run away from the family, and tried to probe the family's history.

Frustrated with that attitude, the family appealed to the Foreign Office to help. The Foreign Office told the family that it would alert the British consulate in Istanbul, and that any further measures would have to be taken by the police. The family were unable to rely on the authorities, who were slow to deal with the case, and were forced to mount their own investigation with the help of Edgar's friends. They formed two investigative teams; they possessed hardly any formal experience in investigation work, and were armed with only a passionate determination to identify what had happened to Edgar.

The family and friends took time off work, and one team flew to Turkey while another was based in London to exert pressure on the authorities here. Within weeks, in an impressive and unprecedented feat, they had located Edgar's belongings and medication in the hotel room. Their presence, steadfast determination and passion appeared to galvanise the embassy officials into action. Although the officials allocated to the case did their best within their limited power, the family believe that the case could have been given a higher priority by the consul general.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): My point is that time is of the essence. As I understand it, the suspected murderer of Edgar Fernandes is being held in custody by the authorities in Malta. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the British authorities and police act now, there is every prospect of being able to put sufficient pressure on the Turkish authorities to deal appropriately with the suspect? Otherwise, he is likely to slip through the net, like so many others who have been associated with the disappearance of British citizens in Turkey over the past 10 years.

Mr. Vaz: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter; he is absolutely right to say that time is of the essence. Later in my speech, I shall suggest what the Government should do.

The family researched the hotel register and interviewed the guests, management and staff of the hotel. The result of that and other investigative work was that they managed to trace a suspect to Malta through Edgar's debit card expenditure. Armed with that evidence and the suspect's name, address and passport number, they went to Kentish Town police station expecting a positive response. Unfortunately, the officer looked at the evidence, consulted the file and reiterated the standard response that Edgar had run away from his family. His "gut feeling" was that Edgar had most probably now gone to Malta. How wrong he was.

The family began to believe that the officers's attitude had disturbing echoes of the case of Stephen Lawrence. By now, they were in despair. The obstructive attitude of some agencies, coupled with the bureaucratic attitude of others, led the family to request my help. They were extremely distraught and feared the worst. I was shocked and horrified by what had transpired, and I readily agreed to support the family. Meanwhile, the family and friends vigorously pursued the search in Turkey. The British consulate in Istanbul informed the family that no news was good news and that, had a British citizen been killed, it would be notified within two days.

The traumatic search continued. Edgar's brother Matthias stayed in Turkey and was joined by his cousin and a friend, believing that they could not rely on the

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authorities to do the work. The family in the United Kingdom researched all the hospitals and mental institutions in Istanbul, produced leaflets carrying photographs of Edgar, translated them into Turkish and faxed them to all those institutions with a detailed description of Edgar in a desperate attempt to trace him. Family members in Turkey continued their meetings with Turkish Interpol, British embassy officials and hotel staff. They also visited the hospitals, police stations and mental institutions, but with no success. Having no time to search the prisons on their own, they decided to consult lawyers to do the same; unfortunately, the cost proved prohibitive.

On 8 May, I arranged a meeting for the family with my noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean. I thank my noble Friend for agreeing to see us. The family appealed to her to put pressure on Turkey to find Edgar and to implore the Turkish authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the whole case. They also asked her to designate an official to follow the case through and galvanise all the authorities into action.

At the very time that we were meeting the Minister, the family in Turkey were looking at pictures of dead bodies in the morgue. Depressingly, one of the photographs was of Edgar's body. I was informed when I was on a train bound for my constituency, and I immediately returned to see the family in London.

The continuing campaign has prevented the family from grieving and mourning their brother and son. The unimaginable shock that must have befallen them can be little understood by those who have not gone through exactly the same experience. The family's hope that Edgar might still be alive lay in tatters, but there was more to endure. Imagine their horror when they discovered that their loved one had indeed been dead for a month and had lain carelessly in an Istanbul morgue decomposing—the same morgue that they had visited earlier, but to which they had been denied access.

Why was Edgar's body not found within the two-day limit that the embassy said was the norm? How did things go so tragically wrong? Why did not the Turkish authorities act immediately on the evidence produced? If Edgar's family had thought that matters could not get worse, they were to be bitterly disappointed.

The family decided to put aside their anguish and mourning, and to set up a campaign to demand justice for Edgar, in the hope that it might act as a catalyst and a precedent for other families in future.

A suspect was swiftly arrested in Malta. I pay tribute to the Maltese authorities for their co-operation and for acting on the evidence presented to them by the family. However, the fight for justice is not yet complete. Extradition papers from Turkey have still not arrived in Malta, and the suspect remains in custody there. Although the Foreign Office has sent a diplomatic message to Malta to keep the suspect in custody until the extradition order arrives, the Maltese have confirmed to the family that, as Malta is a democratic country, it has conduct of its own affairs within the boundaries of the law.

The campaign continues. A couple of weeks ago, the family decided to organise a vigil outside the Foreign Office, which was attended by nearly 100 people.

Trying to ensure that information flows freely between three countries has been a bureaucratic nightmare. British Interpol has said that it is "just a post office". The police have claimed that the primary responsibility is with the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office has stated that it is the responsibility of Interpol to liaise with the authorities in Turkey. How can ordinary British families caught in this maze believe that they will ever get justice?

British Interpol has proved to be an insurmountable challenge—it is reluctant to help, and refuses to set aside bureaucratic rules even in the most tragic circumstances. On 8 May, the day that we went to see the Foreign Office Minister, someone in my office spoke to an official at Interpol to request a meeting. The subsequent conversation lasted an hour, as the official repeatedly went to his supervisor to seek guidance.

Later that day, at 3 pm, my staff spoke to Detective Superintendent Whiting, the head of Interpol London, and were told that a meeting between the family and Interpol was impossible and against the rules. It was clear that Detective Superintendent Whiting was unaware that, since the conversations earlier in the day, Edgar's body had been discovered. Those conversations illuminated the fact that we were dealing with an inflexible, inefficient organisation which was out of touch with ordinary people.

In the end, representatives of Interpol came to my office to meet me. I asked them to meet the family. There followed a version of musical rooms in Norman Shaw North, as they first refused, and eventually agreed, to meet members of the family.

There do not seem to be systems and procedures in place to trace British citizens who disappear abroad. What will the Minister do to ensure that families do not have to resort to flying out to those countries to get justice? If the Foreign Office is doing its job, why can it not inform us how many of the 174 people reportedly missing in Turkey have now been found?

I also arranged for the family to meet the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael). I have asked him to send a team of detectives to Turkey to review the investigation, as has happened in several cases involving British citizens murdered abroad. I thank him for agreeing to meet us. The family is hoping for a positive response in the near future.

During its investigation, the Edgar Fernandes campaign group uncovered evidence of another attack on an innocent British Asian person in Turkey in the same month. Dr Qureishi was brutally attacked and left for dead. Unfortunately, his family also had to resort to flying to Turkey in order to discover what had happened to him. He was finally found in a hospital. What steps will the Minister take to protect and safeguard Britons abroad?

During their investigation in Turkey, the family uncovered information that gangs appeared to be targeting British Asians for their passports, which, it was stated, were easy to forge. They were also informed that the passports could fetch up to £6,000 each. The Foreign Office has confirmed that the passport that belonged to Edgar Fernandes entered into Bulgaria and Greece. British passports with ethnic names can fetch the maximum price in Turkey and Edgar Fernandes has paid the ultimate price for that. If he had been given that information, the family are convinced that he would never have gone to Turkey on holiday. What steps will the Minister take to inform other Britons of the dangers posed to them?

The other principal concern in this tragic case is the lack of investigation since the family members have returned to the United Kingdom. Time erodes memories and evidence. The family were shocked to discover that no forensic evidence was collected, but cost implications preclude the family from returning to Turkey to press for more action. Will my hon. Friend continue the investigation and conclude what the family have already achieved? The British police have informed the family that they are not aware of any new information or evidence having been unearthed since their return from Turkey. I can deduce from this only that not all the leads given to the Turkish authorities have been followed through.

Furthermore, the Minister has assured us that the Foreign Office is actively following up the case. I appreciate the enormous burdens on the Foreign Office, but I have several specific requests, of which I have given my hon. Friend notice. Will he explain why the family have not been given a report on the progress of the investigation for more than a month? The lack of monitoring may seriously jeopardise the case. Will the Minister write to the Turkish authorities expressing his concerns and impressing on them the importance of following all leads and conducting a thorough investigation in order to bring the suspect to justice?

My constituents have the highest respect for the Turkish people, and have found most of them to be very helpful. They simply seek justice for Edgar. Will the Minister write to the British embassy in Istanbul to ask the consul general to give the case the highest priority? Will he also ask for the family to be provided with fortnightly reports on the investigation, and will he agree to meet the family in order to discuss the matter further?

I conclude by paying tribute again to the family and friends of Edgar Fernandes for their dedicated investigative effort and to my hon. Friends, many of whom have written letters of support. The family need the full support and backing of the Foreign Office, as well as of Interpol and the Home Office, in order to pursue the fight for justice. I call on the Minister to embrace the concerns that I have raised and to use them to fashion a constructive approach. Edgar, his family and the thousands of British holidaymakers who travel to Turkey deserve nothing less. Edgar Fernandes must be allowed to rest in peace.

12.28 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. I respect his strong commitment to his constituents' problems. Before I respond to the points that he has raised, I should like to express my condolences to the family of Mr. Fernandes.

The Government are fully committed to the protection of all British nationals travelling abroad. I am glad to be able to respond to the matter that my hon. Friend has raised by letting him know how the Government, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and our consular staff in Istanbul, Ankara and Valletta have acted. I begin by outlining the Foreign Office's knowledge of, and role in, the case. Then I hope to be able to take up the specific points that my hon. Friend identified as problematic.

Mr. Fernandes's family first contacted the Foreign Office consular division on 21 April 1998 to report Mr. Fernandes missing. Checks made through our consulate general in Istanbul showed that airport passport police had a record of his entry to Turkey on 8 April but no sign of departure. The family were advised by the Foreign Office to file a missing person's report with their local police station, which they did at Kentish Town police station on 22 April. Kentish Town police passed a message to Interpol UK the same day, which duly sent it to the Interpol bureau in Turkey. As the case progressed, the message was also passed to the bureaux in Egypt and Malta.

On 23 April, two members of the Fernandes family flew to Istanbul in the hope of tracing Mr. Fernandes. They contacted our consulate general staff who, on 27 April, asked the head prosecutor in Istanbul to investigate the disappearance as a matter of urgency. Members of our consular staff accompanied the family to hospitals in Istanbul and to a meeting with the deputy chief of police and the head of Interpol in Istanbul on 5 May.

It was not until 5 May that the Turkish authorities told our consulate general that they had a record of Mr. Fernandes's passport leaving Turkey at the Bulgarian border on 20 April. Further checks by our embassy in Sofia on 6 May showed that a person using that passport had entered Bulgaria by train from Turkey on 20 April and had left by foot at Kulhata on the Greek border on 21 April. Unfortunately, the Greek authorities do not keep records of European Union passport holders entering or leaving Greece. Mr. Fernandes's passport details have now been entered on a passport warning list, which means that anyone found using his passport, or trying to use it to apply for a visa, would be stopped.

On 8 May, the Turkish police showed a photograph of a body found on 10 April by the Bosphorus sea in Istanbul to a relative of Mr. Fernandes, who provisionally identified it. On 12 May, the relative saw the body and confirmed that it was the body of Edgar Fernandes.

I understand that, while he was staying in Istanbul, Mr. Fernandes shared a room at a guest-house with an Egyptian, Mr. Mohamed Abdal Monem Abbas Aly. Interpol and the family established that Mr. Aly left the guest house on 14 April and entered Malta on 16 April. Mr. Aly came further under suspicion with the discovery that Mr. Fernandes's credit card was used in Istanbul on 15 and 16 April and then in Malta on 22 April.

Our embassy in Cairo asked the Egyptian authorities for a photograph of Mr. Aly to assist in police investigations. Interpol UK was informed of Mr. Aly's arrest in Malta on 11 May, where he has been charged with fraud and immigration offences. Mr. Aly subsequently admitted to being responsible for Mr. Fernandes's death. That information was passed to the Fernandes family through Kentish Town police.

In relation to the specific point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East, let me tell him that, in the past few days, the Turkish authorities have made a formal request to the Maltese authorities for Mr. Aly's extradition to Turkey to stand trial for Mr. Fernandes's murder. The Turkish authorities informed Interpol UK of that request.

Our missions in Ankara and Valletta have pressed the Turkish and Maltese authorities to deal with the extradition request quickly and to bring matters to a

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speedy conclusion. In particular, our mission in Valletta has sought the assurance of the Maltese Government that Mr. Mohamed Abdal Monem Abbas Aly would not be deported until the extradition request from Turkey had been received and duly considered by the competent Maltese authority. We continue to press both the Turkish and the Maltese authorities to deal with the case expeditiously.

A number of questions were asked; I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East for giving me notice of them. First, it was suggested that the case could have been given a higher priority by the consul general. I want to make it clear that it is always a matter of judgment how best to deal with those matters, but I can assure the House that the consul general has been active in seeking justice for the Fernandes family. As I said, the consul general has been active over a period of many weeks in contacting the Turkish authorities, often daily, in seeking to persuade them to process extradition proceedings in Malta—something that they have now done—and in assisting the Fernandes family on their visits to Turkey.

Secondly, my hon. Friend suggested that the British police could have done more to help the Fernandes family. However, as the crime was committed in Turkey, it is primarily a matter for the Turkish police. As I explained to the House, the family was advised by the Foreign Office to file a missing persons report at the local police station, which it did on 22 April.

On the same day, the Kentish Town police informed Interpol UK of the situation and subsequently informed the Interpol bureau in Turkey. In addition, before there was an identification of Mr. Fernandes, the Metropolitan police offered to try to obtain fingerprints from his London home if that would assist the identification.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend suggested that the British Government had not done enough to help to trace British citizens who disappear abroad. I can assure the House that, regardless of the background to any case, the Foreign Office takes extremely seriously any report of a missing British citizen. Attempts to identify the location of missing persons are given priority, and practical steps are taken, as was the case when Mr. Fernandes was reported missing.

A fourth point is that a number of British nationals who have been reported missing in Turkey over the past 10 years have not been accounted for. May I explain to the House that, although every case is individually followed up, it is not always possible to obtain information on the whereabouts of missing persons.

As every consular official in every post in the world will confirm, there are often reports of missing persons who are not missing persons. In many cases where missing persons turn up somewhere else, to the knowledge of the police or of relatives or friends, that information is not always passed on to the Foreign Office. Sometimes, therefore, our consular officials do not know whether a particular missing person has been located. In other cases, the information is available and is collated by our Department.

A further point raised by my hon. Friend was the suggestion that inadequate precautions have been taken by the Government to protect Britons who travel abroad. Of course, it is not possible to warn our citizens of every danger, especially where that danger cannot be specifically foreseen. Every caution must be taken not to be alarmist.

Where there are identifiable hazards, our consular services take their responsibilities extremely seriously and provide travellers with details of potential hazards and how they can minimise the risks. In the case of Turkey, our consul advises travellers that there is a relatively high risk of robbery there, so that they are aware of it when travelling to that country.

Another suggestion, which I find alarming, was that British nationals of different ethnic backgrounds are not given the same priority. May I make it emphatically clear to the House that it is a policy of the Government that all British citizens are treated with the same priority. If hon. Members have any evidence that that is not the case, I should be grateful if they would provide me with that evidence. I can assure them of an immediate investigation and appropriate action.

Ministers have met the Fernandes family. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary met representatives of the family on 8 and 27 May. She wrote to the family a few weeks ago, on 29 June. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) has also met the Fernandes family, as my hon. Friend mentioned. I am prepared to meet representatives of the family, if that would be helpful, but it may be more appropriate for my noble Friend the Under-Secretary to do so.

I reassure the House that the investigation of the circumstances surrounding any missing British citizen abroad is given top priority by the Government. All action that we believe to be effective will be taken and pursued, in this case and in any other case. We would always want to keep those involved in any case advised of developments. All British citizens will be treated with the same degree of priority. I repeat my condolences to the family of Mr. Fernandes and reiterate that the Government will take every step to ensure that justice is done in relation to this terrible tragedy.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-one minutes to One o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LLOYDS TSB BILL *[Lords]* (*By Order*)

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 28 July at Seven o'clock.

ALLIANCE AND LEICESTER PLC (GROUP REORGANISATION) BILL *[Lords]* (*By Order*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 23 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The President of the Board of Trade was asked—

Manufacturing Industry

1. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): What recent reports she has obtained on the state of business confidence in manufacturing industry. [49371]

The President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I receive numerous reports from business about many aspects of economic performance, including the state of business confidence in manufacturing industry. I recognise that some sections of manufacturing have strong concerns at present, but that it is a more mixed picture than is sometimes suggested. For example, the Confederation of British Industry continues to forecast that manufacturing output and investment will grow both this year and next.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Will the Secretary of State study the alarming report published this morning by the British Chambers of Commerce, which tends to be a more reliable organisation than the one she mentioned? It shows that home sales are at their lowest for six years and that export activity is falling sharply on the last quarter, which was a record low, probably because of the problems in the European Union. Will the right hon. Lady remind the Chancellor that manufacturing activity is vital to the economy and that trying to make himself popular with a spending spree is a great danger if the only result is a further increase in interest rates, which would have a devastating effect on manufacturing industry?

Mrs. Beckett: First, while I bow to no one in my respect for the British Chambers of Commerce and I am aware of the survey, I cannot share the hon. Gentleman's view that the CBI is in some way an unreliable organisation. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is extremely well aware of the position in manufacturing industry, about which we continue to liaise closely. Far from seeking merely to make himself popular with his announcements on Tuesday, he is laying a sound basis for reform, modernisation and investment in Britain's future. Far from embarking on some sort of spending spree, he is showing considerable responsibility and prudence, but he is also making the right choices to lay the right path for Britain's future.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): First, is not it the case that our right hon. Friend the Chancellor's announcement on Tuesday has gone some way to encourage British manufacturers because, in the public expenditure increases, the emphasis will be on manufacturing and capital matters and we will see the beginnings of a turnround in those areas? Secondly, I do not think that any of us assumes that interest rates will reduce dramatically in the short term, but can we assume that in the weeks and months ahead, as the Government plan for the next Budget, a case will be made for investment incentives so that manufacturing industry can use the space that it has to plan for the future and take advantage of what we assume will be the better trading prospects throughout the world next year?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that trading prospects throughout the world and the impact of the Asian crisis are in part impinging on manufacturing. He is also right to say that it is important that the manufacturing sector of the economy continues to invest and plan for the future. I am confident that he shares my view and that of the whole Government that some of the announcements made this week—not merely the announcement for investment in the science and engineering base, for example, but the whole basis of the public spending settlement, with its three-year rolling programme approach and the split between capital and current spending—will help to create a climate in which everyone, including business, will feel better able to plan sustainably for the future.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Is the right hon. Lady aware that the north-west chamber of commerce has consulted its manufacturers, who believe that the outlook is extremely gloomy and that the country will slide further into recession, for which they blame the strong pound, six interest rate rises and an increase in business taxation? Is she concerned that they are reducing the number of people in their work forces and that that will have an adverse effect on the plans announced in the House on Tuesday?

Mrs. Beckett: I am, of course, familiar with the some of the work of the north-west chamber of commerce, and I understand its wish to reflect the concerns and anxieties of its members, but I hope that the hon. Lady, who I know takes a great interest in these matters and wants to be accurate, will remind the House that three quarters of the increase in the rate of sterling took place before the general election and before interest rates were increased. Indeed—although I do not expect her to convey this information—the previous Chancellor should have

increased interest rates before the election. People are aware of the concerns of manufacturing, but they are also conscious that the difficulties that are being experienced are a result of what is happening in Asia and of pressures on sterling because of concerns about the euro. The picture is much more mixed than the Conservative party pretends.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that there were 618 inward investment projects last year—the highest number ever—shows that foreign investors believe that the British economy has a stable future? Does she also agree that the £1.1 billion that has been made available to the university science base will help to anchor the pharmaceutical and chemical industries, for example, which rely on their collaboration with universities, and that that will lead to a strengthening of confidence in the British economy?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is entirely right. There is indeed an all-time record in inward investment projects. As he correctly said, 618 new projects were signed last year, which is the first time that the number has been above 500. That substantial increase is a sign of the confidence of inward investors in the future of this country; that confidence will be strengthened by the Government's announcement of long-term investment to create the basis for prosperity in manufacturing in the future.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): The British Chambers of Commerce survey that was published today shows meltdown in manufacturing. Meanwhile, private sector earnings are going up by more than 6 per cent. a year. Labour has created a boom-and-bust economy—bust for manufacturing, boom for most of the other businesses. Will the right hon. Lady say how much of the money the Chancellor announced this week will be swallowed up in large, inflationary pay awards as the public sector seeks to catch up with the private sector? What impact will that have on manufacturing prospects? Will she urge the Chancellor, as Conservative Members have repeatedly done, to change policy on tax, interest rates and savings to give manufacturers some relief?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman has failed to notice that commentators, who have some genuine concerns, have pointed out that recent statistics—on confidence levels and so on—are a repetition of what was shown some five or six years ago. At that time, of course, not only was the Conservative party in power, but I rather think he was in the Government and perhaps even in my Department, so I find his use of the word meltdown interesting, even though it is, of course, nonsense. There are real concerns, which is understandable, but, as I said, the picture is rather more mixed than his extravagant claims suggest.

Output in manufacturing has been broadly flat over the past year—for the past three months it is up 0.1 per cent. on the previous three months, and the volume of exports grew in each of those three months.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Do not write home about it.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman may think that 0.1 per cent. is not a massive increase, but I should point out that over the whole history of the previous Government manufacturing output grew, on average, by only 0.5 per cent. a year.

2. **Mr. Andy King** (Rugby and Kenilworth): What action her Department has taken to improve the competitiveness of manufacturing industry in Europe during the British presidency of the European Union. [49372]

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): My Department's priority during our presidency has been to promote policies, in partnership with industry, to improve European competitiveness and I believe that we have made a real impact. Key areas in which we have made progress include the single market, research and development, telecommunications and electronic commerce and promoting entrepreneurship and trade liberalisation. Competitiveness is now firmly embedded in the language of Brussels, helped in no small part by our efforts, and I am especially pleased with the profile given to economic reform at the Cardiff summit.

Mr. King: Does my hon. Friend agree that Britain's new relationship with our European partners is already bearing fruit and that it is in stark contrast with the miserable legacy that we inherited from the Tory Government, who succeeded only in reviling Europe and alienating Britain from the rest of the continent? We have a much better future for manufacturing in Britain under the new Labour Government.

Mr. McCartney: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. It is absolutely correct to say that the Government have begun to turn round the appalling legacy of that rabble over there, who spent most of their time trying to close down British industry, and that we are spending our time building it up. Yesterday, it was announced that Britain is the No. 1 nation for inward investment for the first time ever, and the more than 500 new investment projects are a clear sign that we have the confidence of both the national and the international business community.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Why was no progress made on the chocolate directive, which has damaged the competitiveness of British chocolate manufacturing?

Was there any discussion during the British presidency of the Commission proposals for compulsory consultation of employees in all companies with 20 or more employees? Does not he expect that to damage the competitiveness of British manufacturing industry?

Mr. McCartney: I cannot give the hon. Lady a definitive answer on the directive but, as someone who enjoys chocolate, I can assure her that nothing will be done under this regime to damage the British chocolate industry. A Mars a day keeps me at bay.

To answer the hon. Lady's clever question, we have made it absolutely clear both in opposition and in government that we will apply subsidiarity. If a Commission proposal places requirements on companies that operate solely within a country's own boundaries, we will oppose it. We are in favour of information and

consultation, and the "Fairness at Work" White Paper is a step forward in that direction, guaranteeing employment rights, but if the Commission proposals are made in the form that has been suggested, the Government will oppose them.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): We may no longer be president of the European Union, but we can still set an example. In a threatened global economy, have not we set a good example this week? I may or may not be a parliamentary poodle, but I am an unreconstructed Keynesian. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need good old Keynesian investment? The United Kingdom showed the way this week by putting nearly £50 billion into our economy. If that does not stimulate our manufacturing industry, and European industry, nothing will.

Mr. McCartney: Our No. 1 priority both here and in Europe has been employability: co-ordinating policies to deal with the 18 million people who are unemployed in Europe, more than half of whom have been out of work for more than a year. While we have been developing those policies with our European colleagues, the Opposition have fought tooth and nail against the windfall tax and the introduction of the new deal to get young people and older workers back to work. Once again, the Government are doing effective work throughout Europe and in the United Kingdom to get down the appalling levels of unemployment left by the previous Government.

Euro

3. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What action her Department has taken to improve awareness among British companies of the introduction of the euro. [49373]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. Nigel Griffiths): We have set up the euro preparations unit and DTI Ministers have taken part in a wide range of events to help business prepare for the single currency. Our officials are working to assist companies.

Mr. Watts: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. May I draw to his attention the fact that many companies in St. Helens have still taken no action to prepare for the introduction of the euro? What action will the Department take to make those companies more aware of the problems and opportunities that will exist once the euro is introduced? Does my hon. Friend share my view that it is crucial that we show world leadership on this issue and that the divisions on the Opposition Benches on it are damaging to Britain and British industry? Does he agree that it is time the Leader of the Opposition came off the fence on this issue and showed real leadership qualities?

Mr. Griffiths: I agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, he echoes the words of Sir Leon Brittan, who ridiculed the Opposition's view of the preparations for the euro. The euro preparations unit has been able to assist companies in my hon. Friend's constituency and all others. It has taken several measures to raise awareness among United Kingdom businesses about the practical changes that will come with the introduction of the single currency on 1 January. They include a series of fact sheets, a business-friendly diagnostic pack and an internet website, all backed by a dedicated phone line.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Given that the euro is not just another foreign currency, but the currency that will dominate 80 per cent. of the European single market and will increasingly be used as the base currency for business transactions in this country, will the Minister have a word with the various people involved in the business for sterling campaign that, much as we respect their right to express opinions and stir up debate, their companies must also prepare for the euro? Otherwise, there will be grave competitive disadvantages to the United Kingdom economy.

Mr. Griffiths: I am keen to endorse those sentiments on behalf of the Government and, indeed, to encourage the route that the hon. Gentleman so rightly advises. That is why we have set up a euro preparations unit. We are doing all we can to ensure that British businesses, in a market where, as the hon. Gentleman said, 80 per cent. of the countries and businesses will be operating in the euro, are well geared up to ensure they are not damaged by that prospect. It is important that they take advantage of the advice that is given through the Government's agencies without delay.

Low Pay Commission

4. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): If she will make a statement about the future of the Low Pay Commission. [49374]

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade announced to the House on 18 June that the Low Pay Commission will be asked to continue its work, monitoring and evaluating the introduction and impact of the national minimum wage.

About 2 million workers will benefit from our proposed minimum wage rates: some 1.4 million are women, over 1.3 million are part-time workers, some 200,000 are young people, around 110,000 are home workers, approximately 175,000 are lone parents who work and some 130,000 are ethnic minority workers.

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. More than 1,600 families in my constituency are delighted that at long last we shall see an end to poverty pay, which was the trademark of the previous Government. Will my hon. Friend explain how long he believes the Low Pay Commission will remain in operation? Does he agree that this is the real way to encourage people off benefits and into work?

Mr. McCartney: The Low Pay Commission will continue and the best way to ensure that it does is to ensure that at the next election that lot on the Opposition Benches do not get elected again. *[Laughter.]* I say that in all seriousness because in our debate on Monday evening, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) made it absolutely clear that the Conservatives would review all the new employment rights that we will provide under our fairness at work proposals, including the minimum wage. We assume that

they will go into the next election fighting for wage cuts for the 2 million lowest-paid workers in Britain. What a shambles. What a rabble.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): If it were discovered as a result of the monitoring exercise that the Minister has mentioned that one of the results of the introduction of the minimum wage was a loss of employment opportunities, a loss of jobs and, due to a maintenance of differentials, a general increase in wage costs, what conclusions would the Minister, the Low Pay Commission and the President of the Board of Trade draw?

Mr. McCartney: The right hon. Gentleman should opt for sackcloth and ashes. As Minister of State, Department for Education and Employment, he was one of those responsible for getting rid of wages councils—thus ensuring that 2 million low-paid workers in Britain received no protection—and putting 3 million people on the dole. What nonsense. The Low Pay Commission was established to ensure that the minimum wage is implemented in a fair and effective way. Since the announcement of the rate, no one, except the Conservative party, has made other than positive remarks about the way in which the Government have gone about the matter.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Will the Low Pay Commission be a permanent body? Will its remit include monitoring and evaluating the variable rates for those under 18 and those in training? When will the Low Pay Commission next report? Will its conclusions be introduced free from political interference or influence?

Mr. McCartney: First, I make it absolutely clear that the Low Pay Commission will continue because it has a job to do in monitoring and evaluating the introduction of the national minimum wage. From time to time, it will report to the Government on those matters. It is an important partnership body and it is central to the effective introduction of the national minimum wage. We went out of our way to make clear the commission's independence, and that independence led the Government to agree to its 24 recommendations—and they will be implemented.

British Industry

5. **Mr. Ross Cranston** (Dudley, North): If she will make a statement about her Department's policy on increasing the productivity of British industry. [49376]

The President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Improving productivity is at the heart of the Government's drive to improve the competitiveness of UK companies. The responsibility for that lies largely with business itself, but the Government have a key role to play, which is why I set up six business-led working parties last year to make recommendations about how the Government and business could work together in partnership to promote competitiveness.

I am also co-hosting, with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a series of seminars on the UK's productivity gap. That work will contribute to a White Paper on competitiveness, to be published in the autumn, which, for the first time, will have been prepared in partnership with the business community.

Mr. Cranston: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her partnership approach and on bringing industry to the heart of government. Do not the productivity figures produced by Professor Siebert of the Kiel institute in Germany, demonstrating that labour productivity in Britain is only 70 per cent. of that in Germany, give the lie to the Tory Government's claim that they left us a golden economic legacy? Does she further agree that British industry must lift its game, for example by improving research and development to the levels that obtain in, say, the pharmaceutical industry?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I share his view, which is shared widely throughout British business and industry. It is necessary to raise our game and for British companies to become more productive and competitive. My hon. Friend is also entirely right to point out that the legacy of the productivity gap gives the lie to the propaganda put out before the election by the Conservative party. I fear that there will be more than one stark difference between our competitiveness White Paper and those produced by the previous Government. Not only will ours have been prepared in partnership with business, it will look at the whole picture—both sides of the balance sheet—instead of being simply a leaflet that says what a wonderful job the Government are doing.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Would not it have been more helpful in terms of increasing British industry's productivity if, instead of hitting the boards with the Chancellor, the President of the Board of Trade had persuaded him to introduce a package of expenditure measures that were appropriate to the increase in industrial productivity, rather than the contrary? Will not the spending splurge that he announced to the House, particularly the vast increase in social security spending and the likelihood that interest rates will have to go up from their present high levels as a consequence, gravely damage British industrial productivity, rather than the contrary?

Mrs. Beckett: That is a load of rubbish. My right hon. Friend made it absolutely plain that modernisation and reform in the public services and beyond are the basis of his programme. Competitiveness and productivity are matters for companies, although the Government have a role in ensuring that the legislative framework does not impede them. The Chancellor's announcements, particularly on science and engineering investment, will help British business. The pharmaceutical industry had urged such steps before my right hon. Friend published his proposals, and it has welcomed them since.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on helping to increase United Kingdom productivity. Yorkshire was devastated by pit closures caused by the previous Government, and that has left pockets of pain. When my right hon. Friend creates partnerships, will she have regard for west Yorkshire in particular and for Yorkshire in general as the region

requires the encouragement of partnerships with engineering and manufacturing industry to regenerate jobs?

Mrs. Beckett: I have the highest regard for west Yorkshire and for its people. I am mindful of its glorious history and of the need for the Government to do all we can in partnership with business to ensure that it has a glorious future. A great deal of our work is focused on the need for investment, for innovation, for the spread of best practice and for British industry to be encouraged to raise its game to create greater opportunities for employment that would help to relieve the difficulties to which my hon. Friend drew attention.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): May I wish the President of the Board of Trade a happy holiday during the summer recess? Before she goes, however, does she agree that she needs to raise her productivity for the sake of British business? With her in tray stretching to the ceiling, British business does not know the answers to fundamental questions about Government policy, which it needs to know if it is to raise productivity and investment. Will she promise us an energy policy? Will she promise us a competition policy that can work in detail? Will she promise us a policy that will allow the Post Office to expand? Will she promise us a water competition policy that will allow new entrants to the markets? Will she promise statements on all those things before she goes away? After a year of her dithering, industry needs the answers.

Mrs. Beckett: In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, I wish the right hon. Gentleman a happy holiday—unless he is going to waste his time giving more misleading information to the press. I shall not be taking a two-month holiday, as he alleged I did last year. I have never had a two-month holiday in my life. Perhaps I might look forward to such a thing when I retire.

As for the litany of nonsense that the right hon. Gentleman churned out for the 55th time, I do not know where he has been for the past year. My Department has had a hand in or produced eight pieces of legislation in the past 15 months. During the previous three years, under the Conservative Government, there may have been one. Certainly there was none in the previous two years. We have made statements on energy policy. We have changed competition law. Discussions are under way with the Post Office about how it can exploit its competitiveness. We are addressing all those issues. We inherited nothing from the Conservatives—no energy policy, no Post Office policy likely to succeed and a competition policy that they had been discussing for 10 years before a Labour Government brought in a Bill. We need no lecture from the right hon. Gentleman.

Regional Assistance

6. **Dr. Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): What proposals she has for the future of regional assistance. [49377]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. Nigel Griffiths): Regional selective assistance can play an important role in regional regeneration. We want to ensure that we use it most effectively.

Dr. Wright: The future of regional assistance from Europe and from home is under review. Will the Minister say something about the report of the coalfields task force? We owe a particular debt to coalfield areas. The Government deserve congratulations on setting up and welcoming the report, which provides a framework for regeneration for all the pit closure areas. Will my hon. Friend ensure that regeneration of the coalfield areas is central to regional policy and that it is a central objective of the new regional development agencies?

Mr. Griffiths: The coalfields task force has brought together three Government Departments with coalfield representatives, English Partnerships and the chief executives of local authorities. The task force has recommended a wide-ranging plan of action to help coalfield communities, including continued objective 2 and RECHAR funding. The Government strongly support those objectives.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the view of the Trade and Industry Select Committee that, as the proposals stand, the UK's share of the European Union structural funds is set to fall further? What guarantee can he offer the House that he would resist any reduction at all, and that he and his right hon. Friends would readily apologise to the House if they had to concede such a reduction?

Mr. Griffiths: I fear that the hon. Gentleman has confused selective assistance with European structural funds. In that confusion, he undermines the case that the British Government are putting to Europe to ensure that as many jobs and as many areas as possible are protected. That is the priority of the Government.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): When my hon. Friend considers ways of using regional funds to support the former coalfields and the recommendations of the coalfields task force, will he take particular note of the problems of the east Kent coalfield and the closed pits of east Kent, which were closed by the Conservative Government without apology or compensation? Will he take note of the isolation of the east Kent coalfield and of the fact that, in the past, the area missed out on RECHAR and on the Conservative Government's measures of support?

Mr. Griffiths: I have visited my hon. Friend's constituency more than once and I know of his concern, which he continues to press on behalf of his constituents. In the light of what he has said, it is important to ensure that there is an integrated approach to the matter by Government Departments, if we are to be as helpful as possible to industries that have suffered, such as those in his constituency.

Coal Industry

7. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What assessment she has made of the implications of her energy policy for employment in the coal industry over the next three years. [49378]

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): Purchasing and sourcing coal are commercial decisions for the coal-fired generators. Obviously, it is up to the coal industry itself to respond

to market opportunities. Our task as a Government is to ensure a level playing field and fair market conditions for competition in coal. That is exactly what we are now delivering.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but does he agree that one of the greatest threats facing the coal mining industry comes from cheap imports of coal? Will he tell us what he has done to speak to the German and the Spanish Governments in particular to stop their unfair subsidies to their coal mining industries?

Mr. Battle: Yes. We have supported the claims of companies that have protested about unfair imports, whether from Germany or elsewhere, through the European Commission. That is rather more than the previous Administration did. The hon. Gentleman talks about threats to the coal industry; I think that the previous Government was the greatest threat to the coal industry.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my hon. Friend aware that one of the reasons for his having to deal with the remnants of the coal industry—a maximum of 24 deep-mined pits—is what happened during those past 18 years, especially since 1992, when the previous Government, for the first time ever, actually closed pits themselves? Is my hon. Friend aware that, as a result of the closures made by the previous Secretary of State—who now sits somewhere on the Back Benches, when he turns up; he must be on some sort of productivity drive—there are still pit villages with more than 30 per cent. unemployment? The only way in which we can deal with that problem is to ensure that we keep those 20-odd pits working. We must also ensure that, in the process, we do not stuff the pockets of Mr. Richard Budge, who had his pockets filled by the previous Tory Government, when they handed over the remnants of the coal industry.

Mr. Battle: We have no intention of stuffing anybody's pockets. We inherited a deeply flawed market for power generation. We have tackled that flawed structure and proposed a programme to reform it, which is out for consultation. That reform will ensure that there is a genuinely fair market for coal. To be fair to the coalfield communities, they asked us not for favours, but for fairness. We are delivering that fairness and it will ensure that there is a place for coal in the market. Where communities have suffered as a result of policies in the past, our actions such as those in respect of the task force on regeneration, to which my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs referred, should make some practical, positive contribution.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): We have some sympathy with the Minister and the Department for having the coal deal fixed for them by the Paymaster General. Now that the Minister has had a month to reflect on the deal, will he tell the House whether the proposals in that consultation document will affect the mining of one additional tonne of coal? If so, what will be the implications for the Government's Kyoto and domestic emissions targets?

Mr. Battle: One week, Opposition Members are in favour of public spending; the next week, they are against it. One week, they are against the coal industry; the next week, they are in favour of it. We inherited from the hon. Gentleman's Government, who privatised the coal industry and the whole of the energy sector, a deeply flawed market which was not working.

What have this Government done? We have undertaken a review of energy sources for power generation to ensure that we shall have secure supplies in the future—which is paramount—rather than managing supplies day by day. We have asked the Director General of Electricity Supply to examine the energy-buying market for power stations. We have found that the market was rigged against coal by the previous Administration. We have also introduced a review of utility regulation because the framework that we inherited for consumer regulation was deeply flawed and rickety. In all that work, we shall ensure that there is fair competition in energy policy, that there is room for coal in the market and that it is not unfairly squeezed out as the previous Administration intended.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that he has done in his ministerial position over the past 12 months to achieve a fair market for coal. We have never asked for anything other than a level playing field. Last May, our Government inherited a market that was rigged against the coal industry as a result of political decisions taken by the previous Government. Those coal miners who are left are thanking God that we have a Government who want to restore fairness. My hon. Friend should take no notice of Opposition Members who talk about coal miners' jobs, because they got rid of thousands of jobs in my constituency in a short period.

Mr. Battle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and other hon. Friends who made representations on this matter. The new energy markets are incredibly complex. We accept that, but we have calmly and quietly injected a dose of common sense into the debate. It is important that we consult, not the Conservative party, but industry and people working in the sector so that their views are considered. We can then make proposals for long-term sustainability to ensure that we shall have diverse, secure supplies at competitive prices well into the next century.

Information Technology

8. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that there is effective competition in the market for directories for information technology. [49379]

The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I believe that there are no comprehensive directories available for electronic mail and internet website addresses. They are typically obtained by means of special search engines which can be easily accessed on-line. They are numerous and independent of companies that provide the most popular web browser software packages. The market for information technology directories is emerging and barriers to entry are low, and at present we are not aware of any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour.

Dr. Cable: Will the Minister acknowledge that there is a potential threat to the public interest from private

monopolies being established in information technology, as we have already seen from the software standards of Mr. Gates's companies and the decoding of satellite signals by Mr. Murdoch's companies? Will she further acknowledge that the company that first develops an effective directory system will effectively have control over access to the whole e-mail commerce system? Will she reassure the House that the Department has the capacity to anticipate and react quickly to threats to the public interest and competition in the information sector?

Mrs. Roche: May I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government treat competition issues in this area very seriously? He will know that, under existing United Kingdom competition law, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for investigating claims of anti-competitive behaviour. If the hon. Gentleman has any evidence in that regard, he should notify the director general. These are clearly the industries of the future, and we want to see more and more entrants because that must be good for consumers and for business.

Cycle Industry

9. **Mr. Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): What assessment she has made of the barriers to fair competition facing the UK cycle industry in the domestic market. [49380]

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): My Department makes every effort to ensure that fair and competitive markets are maintained for all sectors of industry in the United Kingdom, including the bicycle industry, which my hon. Friend champions.

Mr. Simpson: I know that my hon. Friend is aware that the Raleigh Cycle Company is located in my constituency and provides some 90 per cent. of United Kingdom bicycles. Is he aware of the legacy of unfairness left to this Government as a result of the Tories' treatment of the United Kingdom cycle industry? First, they refused to tackle the abuse of the quota system, which allowed foreign competitors to dump bicycles from south-east Asia on the United Kingdom market. They refused to take action equivalent to that initiated by the French Government to end that practice. Secondly, the previous Government refused to tackle the unfairness in the tax system, which requires United Kingdom manufacturers to pay tax on imported gearing systems while competitors are not required to do so.

Madam Speaker: Order. What is the hon. Gentleman's question to the Minister?

Mr. Simpson: I am asking whether the Minister is willing to re-examine the legacy of unfairness in the tax and subsidy systems, which saw the Tories subsidising competitors for the provision of screwdriver assembly sites for bikes while disfavouring United Kingdom manufacturers.

Mr. Battle: Raleigh is a world-renowned company, and we want it to remain so. The United Kingdom bicycle industry has been under pressure from far eastern imports. As a result of complaints and investigation, action was taken recently against bicycle imports from China, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia and duties have been imposed. I understand that the European Commission is investigating the dumping of bicycles by Taiwan. That issue was discussed at a member states meeting in an advisory committee in July. Once it is proved that there is a clear case of substantial damage, measures will be taken. We shall continue to oppose unfair trading practices in an effort to ensure that Raleigh has a successful future.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Minister anticipated my question by referring to cheap far eastern bicycle imports. What instructions have the President of the Board of Trade and her team and Foreign Office officials given to our commercial attachés in the People's Republic of China and other far eastern countries about keeping a close look-out for the dumping of cheap far eastern bicycle imports, which skews the market for home-made bicycles in this country?

Mr. Battle: Commercial attachés are under instruction to keep a "close look-out", as the hon. and learned Gentleman puts it. In order to prove a clear case of substantial damage and dumping, we must do our homework. We shall look out for unfair trading practices to ensure that our industry is not damaged unfairly. I cannot say more than that.

Consumer Protection

10. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What measures she has taken to enhance protection for consumers; and if she will make a statement. [49381]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. Nigel Griffiths): My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade and I have taken a number of measures to put consumer interests and consumer protection at the heart of Government, from banning dangerous laser pens to tackling time-share touts and protecting British loaf weights. Among other things, we have targeted rogue directors, introduced a Competition Bill, moved to allow consumers' organisations to take representative actions in our courts and improved protection for low-income consumers seeking credit.

Fiona Mactaggart: I know that my constituents welcome this active approach to consumer protection, especially the swift action that the Minister took last autumn to tackle unsafe fireworks, which led to the largest fall in firework injuries in 23 years. However, will he share my disappointment and anger at those Opposition Members who, by talking out the Fireworks Bill, stopped him building on that track record, and thus put their petty politics before public safety?

Mr. Griffiths: I certainly share, as do firework safety campaigners and the Confederation of British Industry, my hon. Friend's anger at the activities of the former Conservative consumer spokesman, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), and his Conservative friends in talking out that measure. When the hon. Gentleman was a Minister, the number of firework injuries rose by

46 per cent. and 335 more people ended up in hospital. Fortunately, the Government are able to use secondary legislation to outlaw bangers this year.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Minister will be aware of the problems faced by consumers who purchase home-working packs with the promise of making large amounts of money and then find themselves ripped off as the income does not materialise. Does the Minister have any plans to tackle the problems faced by such people, including my constituents in Sheffield, who have found themselves ripped off by unscrupulous home work offerers?

Mr. Griffiths: The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), and I have launched a national campaign on home working. We share the condemnation of the abuse of home workers and we believe that the national campaign will offer real protection by ensuring that people are steered towards projects of proven worth, not projects such as the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I know that the Minister is aware of the difficulty that many of my constituents have had resulting from international lottery draws, whereby individuals are targeted from abroad for lottery winnings. Those are, of course, largely fraudulent acts. I believe that the Advertising Standards Agency has no rights in that regard. Will the Minister turn his attention to such acts originating from Australia, the far east and eastern Europe, to protect consumers in my constituency and throughout the country?

Mr. Griffiths: I am glad to have the opportunity to warn every member of the British public against falling for these unfortunate scams. We are seeking international co-operation on advertising, and in this case the abuse of advertising, to ensure that such scam schemes are prohibited from entering Britain and are put out of business altogether.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Why is the Minister so sickeningly self-satisfied? May I draw his attention to two examples of failure—first, his refusal to respond to the request of the Consumers Association to add consumer issues to the remit of Action 2000 and, secondly, his absolutely supine attitude in Europe? Not long ago, he boasted at a conference that he had contributed strongly in the Consumer Council towards the aim of creating a people's Europe. How is that rhetoric consistent with today's European Court of Justice ruling preventing ordinary people from having access to the designer clothes so beloved by Labour MPs?

Mr. Griffiths: I suppose that the hon. Gentleman is entitled to two questions because both were so poor.

To tackle the first question, given that the present Government have spent 70 times the amount that the previous Government spent on the Action 2000 campaign and on fighting the millennium bug, it is ridiculous that the hon. Gentleman should criticise us on that.

As for today's decision of the European Court of Justice, one of my first acts as a Minister was to invite some of Britain's leading retailers, some of our most successful companies—people who had never been invited under the previous Administration—to come to the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss the very issues that have come up today. We deplore any action that prevents British retailers from providing British consumers with foreign-manufactured goods at reasonable prices. Although it is important that trademarks are protected, a balance must be struck between the right of those who hold trademarks and the right of consumers. It is unfair that British consumers should have to pay inflated prices, and we have taken action to get the European Commission to investigate pricing across all the EU states, because we believe that, in too many areas, British consumers are paying far too much.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that the criticisms of Opposition Front Benchers would have rather more weight if they had not sat on their hands and allowed their Back Benchers to derail the Fireworks Bill? The CBI said that the derailing of that Bill was likely to lead directly to an increase in firework-related injuries. Will my hon. Friend ask Opposition Front Benchers whether they will now co-operate in ensuring that the Bill comes back to the House and is given a "fair wind", to use their words, so that the number of firework-related injuries continues to go down, rather than going up again as a result of their irresponsible actions?

Mr. Griffiths: This should not be a party political matter. I invite Opposition Members to reflect on it and to support any such Bill. It is noticeable that there were more Opposition Members in the House to block that Bill than the 13 or 14 Back Benchers present this afternoon to discuss that issue and other important matters, such as British manufacturing. They simply do not care.

Defence Industry

11. **Mr. Michael Colvin** (Romsey): What assessment she has made of the impact of the strategic defence review on Britain's defence industries. [49382]

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): Our Department was closely involved with the strategic defence review so that we were able to analyse carefully the implications for the UK defence industry of the emerging proposals. Industry was also closely involved, which led to widespread agreement on how to modernise our defence procurement processes and the White Paper, which has been warmly welcomed.

Mr. Colvin: I thank the Minister for that reply. Did he see in the SDR reference to the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency? Has he had time yet to read the report on the agency by the Defence Select Committee, which concludes that, in view of the sensitive work that it undertakes and the importance of preserving its impartiality and critical mass, it is a part of the public sector that should not be privatised?

Mr. Battle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments. I have read the Defence Select Committee report and the Government have announced proposals, as was set out in our manifesto before the election, to set up a defence diversification agency within DERA to foster, in partnership with industry, a greater two-way

technology transfer between the military and civil sectors. Decisions on the way ahead will be announced when the results of the consultation process have been assessed. I understand that industry is involved in that consultation, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's comments and those of the Select Committee will have been noted.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is the Minister aware how much the strategic defence review has been welcomed by those in the steel industry, because of course steel is the raw material to be used in the new ships and aeroplanes discussed in the review? Has my hon. Friend seen early-day motion 1563 on the Order Paper today, in my name and the names of about three dozen other hon. Members, which draws attention to the productivity record of the British steel industry? Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the steel industry prepares for our new defence procurement programme, it is getting little help from the Conservatives, who did nothing for that industry while they were in power and do everything to talk down the steel industry and manufacturing now that they are in opposition?

Mr. Battle: My hon. Friend champions the steel industry at every opportunity, and he is welcome to do so. He represents his constituents and the industry well in doing that. The Defence Industries Council welcomes the partnership that was offered by the strategic defence review. It stated:

"The defence industry welcomes the Government's firm commitment to a partnership with UK industry to acquire equipment and services for the armed services more cost effectively."

More important, there will be benefits for companies throughout the country—not only those that supply the gear, but those in the supply chains that back up that equipment.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the modernisation of the defence procurement plans. Does the Minister agree that the Raytheon project, which is a combined project involving large parts of British industry, is important, and will he support it as it progresses?

Mr. Battle: Contracts are out for procurement and I obviously cannot comment on them. The defence review is good news for industry as a whole and has been welcomed by industry. In combination with the work of DERA and the defence diversification agency, it will contribute to manufacturing success in the UK in the future.

Arms Sales

12. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What considerations she took into account in formulating her proposals to amend procedures on arms export licences. [49383]

Mrs. Roche: The White Paper on strategic export controls was published on 1 July. In drawing up the proposals contained in it, the main consideration has been to develop the right legislative and procedural framework for effective, clear and accountable strategic export controls. The Government have taken account of the recommendations contained in the Scott report and the views expressed by the 38 respondents to the consultation document published by the previous Government. Views on the proposals are invited by 30 September.

Mr. Heath: Does the Minister recognise that there is deep concern about the confusion of having six Departments of State involved in arms control, that we have succeeded in selling arms to regimes that are deeply unpleasant and sometimes deeply insolvent, and that there is a lack of transparency and clarity which means that the outside world cannot tell whether a licence is issued for an armoured car or a packet of washers? Is it not time to review the arms control regime completely and produce something that is open to proper scrutiny, and particularly scrutiny by Members of this place?

Mrs. Roche: I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would take the time to read the White Paper in detail. It responds to the criticisms made in the Scott report, which the Government are committed to dealing with. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary published the criteria that he did a year ago and why the Government are committed to much more transparency, which is why we are committed to publishing an annual report on this vital work.

Health Expenditure

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement. The Government's top priorities are to renew and modernise our country's health and education systems. On Tuesday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was able to announce that, as a result of our comprehensive spending review, an extra £21 billion will be invested in the national health service in the United Kingdom over the next three years—approaching £18 billion in England. This is an average annual real-terms increase of 4.7 per cent. over the three years—starting off with 5.7 per cent. next year. It will kick start the Government's 10-year programme of modernisation for our national health service.

This is the biggest cash increase ever announced for the NHS. The step change in funding will be matched by the biggest programme of renewal and modernisation since the NHS was founded—investment for reform. £21 billion is a large sum of money. It was welcomed by the representatives of all the people working in the NHS and described by the National Health Service Federation as beyond their wildest dreams. However, when set against the rundown state of the NHS which we inherited, when set against the improvements which the staff and the public are seeking, and when set against the scale of our ambitions for the service, even £21 billion is a settlement which will have to be tightly managed and properly targeted.

Not all the problems that we inherited in the NHS will be solved over the next three years. They are too deeply entrenched for that. Not all the improvements that we seek can be delivered in that time. But what both staff and the public will see is demonstrable year-on-year improvements in all parts of the health and social care systems.

Staff and patients alike want to see a modern and dependable service. A modern health service requires high and stable levels of funding. In all its long history, the NHS has never before had a three-year settlement. The NHS has never been able to plan beyond the short term. Modern organisations have to plan for the longer term. The NHS can now do that for the very first time

A modern health service requires enough staff, well trained and highly motivated. With the extra money that we are making available, the NHS will be able to take on more doctors and more nurses—up to 7,000 more doctors and 15,000 more nurses over the next three years. Earmarked funds will be provided to allow staff to update their skills to keep up with rapidly changing technology. I can tell the House today that, over the next three years, there will be an extra 6,000 nurse training places, and I will shortly be announcing a large increase in the number of places in medical schools. With those extra staff, NHS hospitals will treat an extra 3 million patients.

Expanding staff numbers, in particular to deal with some of the shortages that we know exist, depends on pay rises being fair and affordable: fair, to allow us to recruit and retain motivated staff; affordable, to allow us to make the modernisations that patients demand. Fair pay and modernisation must go hand in hand, and that is why, for the first time, we are asking the pay review bodies formally to take into account the service improvements that we want to achieve, the resources available to the NHS and the Government's inflation target, as well as recruitment and retention.

The three-year settlement allows the NHS to take a longer-term view. Now that funds are guaranteed for three years, there should, for example, be no more systematic use of short-term contracts of employment for nurses and other staff. That will provide security that they do not have at present.

A modern health service requires modern buildings and modern equipment. Over recent years, the NHS has been starved of capital. We are putting that right. That is why, as part of the modernisation programme, £8 billion will be invested in new hospitals, clinics and GP premises. Thirty new hospitals are already planned, and work is already under way at eight: Dartford and Gravesham, Norfolk and Norwich, Carlisle, High Wycombe, Durham, Sheffield, Amersham and Greenwich. There will be more to come, and new and better buildings will not be confined to the places that are getting new hospitals. We will be increasing public sector capital by 50 per cent., and hospitals in every part of the country will benefit. Hundreds of wards, accident and emergency departments and operating theatres will be refurbished, and, every year, outdated equipment will be replaced with the newest and best that medical science can offer.

We are investing in primary care. Over the next three years, more than 1,000 GP surgeries will be improved or rebuilt. A modern health service requires earmarked cash to make change happen. I can announce today that the £18 billion settlement for England includes a £5 billion-plus modernisation fund. That money will be strictly targeted on helping NHS staff to transform the NHS into the kind of service that they and we want to see—a service that is fast and convenient, has uniformly high standards and is moulded to the needs of patients.

The modernisation fund will fund an information technology revolution in the NHS. It will go towards making sure that we meet the reductions in waiting lists to which we are committed. We will also use money from the modernisation fund to make a start this coming year on introducing booked admissions, so that when patients are told by their GPs that they need to attend an out-patient department, they will be able, there and then, to book an appointment that suits them. Similarly, if people have to have surgery as a day patient or an in-patient, they will be able to book an admission date that suits their needs, and their family and work requirements.

Besides contributing to the refurbishment of hospitals and the building of new GP premises, the fund will help to buy new equipment, support the promotion of good health, pay for better training of NHS staff and provide modern and effective mental health services. The modernisation fund will be allocated to finance well worked-out plans and proven mechanisms for improving services. It is investment for reform.

A modern health service requires modern ways of working. By getting rid of the wasteful and divisive competitive internal market, we are taking money out of the Tory-created bureaucracy and putting it into patient care. Primary care groups involving doctors, nurses and social services will replace the maze of commissioning and fundholding organisations. NHS trusts' managements will be amalgamated, and competition between hospitals is being ended; they are working together again, and they will continue to do so.

The NHS is, proudly, already the most cost-effective health care system in the world, but there are still unacceptable variations in performance, and management effort will be targeted on hospitals where costs are above the national average. A new performance framework will help to measure progress. Our value-for-money improvements should release a further £1 billion for patient care. There will be a tough drive for genuine efficiency. That means more money for patients and staff, and better value for taxpayers.

A modern health service requires a new relationship with social services. We have made a start on breaking down the Berlin wall between the NHS and social services. To back that up, over the next three years, we are providing an extra £3 billion for social services so that they can match, complement and augment what the NHS is doing. That is an increase of 3.1 per cent. in real terms, year on year on year. For the first time, they will be able to produce joint, local, long-term plans with the national health service and then implement them.

For the first time, we will be setting tough efficiency targets for all social services authorities to help them deliver the goods for vulnerable people. It will mean better help for the elderly, and better and more help for carers. There will be new measures to allow tens of thousands of old people to live an independent life, where, at present, they end up trapped in nursing homes or hospitals. It will mean more help for people with mental health problems to match the extra NHS commitment to mental health.

Arrangements for looking after children in care have far too frequently been deplorable, with children being molested and with low levels of school attendance and educational attainment. Many of them have been turned out of care to fend for themselves when they are little more than children. We are determined to give them a new deal, and the extra social services money will provide the funds necessary to improve the quality of care received by children living away from home—and not before time.

All that effort and all that investment is intended to deal properly with people when they need treatment and care. But the Government are not satisfied with a health policy just for treating the sick. We want to stop people getting ill in the first place and stop people dying prematurely. We want to tackle the growing inequalities in health. That is a job for the whole Government, not just the Department of Health.

The comprehensive spending review settlement is not just a good settlement for our health service; it is a good settlement for our people's health. We have provided £540 million for the Sure Start children's fund, almost £4 billion to invest in decent housing and improved insulation, £3 billion for deprived communities and £1.7 billion for transport, particularly public transport. That is on top of our earlier commitment to the £3.5 billion new deal for jobs and our introduction of a national minimum wage. All that amounts to the biggest health crusade the country has seen since the NHS was born 50 years ago—a modern, Government-wide crusade.

The NHS was founded on the simple principle that care should be provided on the basis of need. That principle has served the NHS well for 50 years. While we were considering the comprehensive spending review we were urged by all sorts of people to abandon that principle. We were urged to do so by some Conservative Members, by the Social Market Foundation, by the Adam Smith Institute, by many of our newspapers and by various pointy-headed professors. They wanted us to charge people for going to the doctor. They wanted us to charge people for going to see their GP, for attending out-patient departments and for going into hospital. We have looked at all that very carefully. We have looked at all the pros and cons, and we have spent the best part of a year doing it. We utterly reject those ideas. We have rejected them because they would not work and they would harm the worst off. Charges would be expensive to collect and would glean little overall revenue. Most important, charges would deny treatment to those who need it most. I can announce today that there will be no new NHS charges in this Parliament.

We have not stopped there. From next April, the NHS will provide free eye tests for pensioners. That will be good for their purses and pockets, good for their sight, and good for their general health.

This is an historic financial settlement. It will enable the hard-working and dedicated staff of the national health service and social services to provide the treatment and care that people need, and to provide it to a higher standard than ever in every part of the country. It will modernise and renew the national health service. The extra money will be matched by enormous changes and improvements.

Over the past few weeks, we have been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the national health service. That was right and proper, but now we must do as the founders of the NHS did—we must look forward, find the resources, and make the changes that are necessary to relaunch the national health service so that it serves our country well for the next 50 years. Nothing less will do, and that is what the Government are doing.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): May I start by regretting that the Secretary of State for Health did not manage on this occasion to observe the usual courtesies and conventions and that I did not have sight of his statement until 3.17 pm? I am returning his discourtesy with a considerable courtesy of my own. Even at this moment, the questions that I am about to ask are being brought to him so that he will have them in front of him and I shall not have to ask him to remember all that I have asked. Therefore, he will be able to address himself to every question.

The Government figures on Tuesday claimed that £21 billion of extra money for our health service was being made available, of which some £18 billion was for England alone. Closer inspection of the make-up of those figures suggests an exercise in accountancy so creative that if it were in any other context one would be sorely tempted to call in the Yard. I have some brief questions for the Secretary of State, and I would appreciate his answering fully and frankly. The questions are in front of him now.

First, can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the difference in overall UK health spending between 1998-99 and 2002 is £10.5 billion, of which £8.8 billion is for England? Does he accept that independent figures that have been produced by the House of Commons Library show that the extra money from the

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

comprehensive spending review over the Conservative real-growth trend of 3.1 per cent. is just over £2 billion and that, although it is welcome, it is a long way from Tuesday's hype and hyperbole? Does he accept that there is an enormous difference between what can be purchased for £2 billion extra and what can be purchased for £18 billion extra?

I am happy to approach the figures either on the double-counting, triple-counting basis of the right hon. Gentleman's £21 billion or on the Opposition's straight increase basis, provided that the same method is used to calculate both his extra spending and our extra spending. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, no matter which way he does it—on his basis or on mine—it results in a £2 billion difference for England, not an £18 billion difference? I shall now move to the main body of his statement. *[Interruption.]*

If the Secretary of State would look me in the eyes, we might believe that he was as happy as he is trying to suggest. Will he confirm that the independence has now been taken out of the independent pay review body and that its recommendations are now subverted to Treasury consideration? Is not that a betrayal of the very principle of such review bodies? What is the right hon. Gentleman's response to the comment by the British Medical Association that it objects to any unilateral attempt to undermine the even-handedness of the pay review body? Will he undertake to honour the recommendations of any such body in future?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the announcement is not of the largest real-terms three-year increase in the history of our health service, as the Chancellor so glibly asserted on Tuesday? All he has to do is to read the editorial in *The Independent* today. If he does, he will find that even that paper agrees. It is below the 5.6 per cent. that we spent between 1990 and 1993. I ask again: will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that this increase is below the 5.6 per cent. increase that we spent in the first three years of this decade? Does he accept Peter Riddell's comment that the Chancellor's public spending statements are like the words of Lewis Carroll: nothing is quite as it seems and the cat's smile vanishes on closer inspection?

Certain specific items of expenditure will have to be taken from the extra money that the right hon. Gentleman has announced. Will he tell me what each one will cost? How much has he made available or set aside for the millennium bug—is he aware that his own Audit Commission said that the cost could be as high as £850 million? How much is he setting aside for the additional costs of the minimum wage to the health service? How much is he keeping for the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering? How much is he allowing for the abolition of tax relief on private medical insurance for the over-60s?

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, by the time that he has set against all his figures the Government's inflation targets—I will be kind and assume that they will be realised—the rate of increases that we managed over our term of office, the costs of the minimum wage, the costs of the millennium bug, the costs of abolishing private medical insurance and compulsory competitive tendering, and the costs of administering each primary care group, his extra £2 billion, welcome though it is, is worth little more than a few hundred million? Finally, is he aware—Will he look at me at this point? *[Interruption.]* He will not look at me, and I suspect that he will not face the employees of the NHS, among whom initial high hopes on Tuesday are now turning to disbelieving anger.

Mr. Dobson: At Department of Health Question Time as recently as last week, the right hon. Lady said that an increase of £9 billion would be the minimum that would be required to meet the Tory level of spending for the NHS. We have increased the sum by £18 billion, double what she asked for—and, for that matter, double what the Liberal Democrats were asking for. If they do not understand the figures, let me give some simple arithmetic, rounded for purposes of argument. Next year, there will be an extra £3 billion. The year after that, there will be an extra £6 billion. The year after that, there will be an extra £9 billion. Even in the Tory arithmetic book, 3 plus 6 plus 9 amounts to 18.

I know that the right hon. Lady claims that the £21 billion is £2.1 billion, and I know that she is not yet old enough for free eye tests, but the figures show that it is £21 billion; there is not a decimal point between the 2 and the 1.

As everyone knows, the pay review bodies have always considered all the other aspects that we have referred to, but those aspects have never been on the face of their terms of reference. All we have done is make it explicit—we think that that is right and proper—rather than trying to do it furtively, as previous Governments have done.

It is bare-faced cheek of the highest order for any Tory to ask what provision we are making for the problems of the millennium bug. When we got in, the Tories had made no provision, although, even for a collection of witless loons like them, the fact that the year 2000 was only three years ahead must have been fairly obvious.

On the national minimum wage, I can confirm that we have made provision for £21 million towards meeting its cost. Even £21 million is too much, and it is a national disgrace that, after 18 years of Tory rule, people working in the health service are getting paid less than the minimum wage.

The costs of primary care groups will cover every general practitioner in the country, and their running costs will equal those of the fundholders who used to represent half the GPs; so we have doubled the efficiency of the system in one fell swoop.

To return to my first point, whatever the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) may do, whatever questions she may have asked the House of Commons Library to answer—questions and, therefore, answers for which the Library staff are not responsible—and whatever answers she may have been given, people representing those who work in the health service have told me personally or have said publicly that the settlement is beyond their wildest dreams. It is a huge sum of money, which will have to be spent carefully, so that we get full value for money.

The right hon. Lady normally prides herself, or so she claims, on being straightforward. Last week, she said that if we found £9 billion she would thank us for it, but she cannot even thank us for £18 billion.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Secretary of State knows that cash for

health is welcome. The Liberal Democrats and others have been urging the Government to take that step since before they were elected and now they have acceded to our wishes, so we are grateful. Without getting into a debate about the billions, can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that 4.7 per cent. for the next three years, which is his figure, means 3.7 per cent. over the five years of this Parliament? Given that everyone accepted that 3 per cent. was needed in the national health service to keep up with inflation, although the additional money is additional and welcome spending money, it is hardly the lottery jackpot.

On staff, can the Secretary of State tell us whether his announcement and the figures today mean that the 8,000 nursing and 2,500 doctor vacancies in the health service will all be filled by the end of the three years? How many additional staff will there be in the service in three years' time, over and above those who are there today? When the pay review body recommends increases in future, with its tighter remit, will those always be implemented immediately and in full rather than staged, which is what the Secretary of State and his colleagues have done in the past year?

Really, it should not be a cause for celebration that a Labour Government tell the House that there will be no more charges. Surely the Secretary of State must answer why a policy that prescription charges will increase for the next three years, as they have done this year, is consistent—that is the Government's policy—when two years ago the Labour party said that increasing such charges was a tax on the sick.

On waiting lists and waiting times—the right hon. Gentleman's own target—at the general election, £100 million was to produce 100,000 off waiting lists as an early pledge. Now that we have £21 billion, will more people come off waiting lists or will it still be only one in 13 by the end of this Parliament? When will everyone know that six months will be the maximum time that they have to wait? If we are trying to keep pressure off the health service, why continue to cap social services budgets when such services can often provide cheaper care?

Does the money that the Secretary of State announced today mean that a hospital such as the Freeman cancer centre in Newcastle can know that, at the end of the three years, it will have curtains round the beds, a shower as well as a 30-year-old bath and separate toilets for men and women?

In my constituency, will the mentally ill know that support services will be available at the weekends and at night, as well as during the day? Will we have a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week health service that is equal and available to all, which is what the people of Britain expect a Government to provide?

Mr. Dobson: For a start, it is worth saying that the national health service is a 24-hour-a-day service. Countless numbers of our fellow citizens deliver that service 24 hours a day, and we should thank them for it, rather than suggest that they are not there some of the time. I say to the representative of the Liberal party what I said to the representative of the Tory party. As recently as last week, the Liberals asked us to guarantee to deliver £9 billion extra. When we deliver £18 billion extra, they have the gall to start whingeing and moaning as usual—which is, I suppose, what qualifies them as Liberals.

Yes, we want to recruit up to 7,000 extra doctors and 15,000 extra nurses, but we obviously cannot guarantee that every shortage in every part of the country will be wiped out over the three years, as sudden acute problems arise in some places and not in others. All that I believe is that we shall be able to go a long way towards resolving those problems, and we shall recruit additional staff so that hard-working doctors, nurses, midwives and other staff are not run off their feet. I really hope that we shall be able to achieve a pay settlement that does not involve staging. That is all that I can say at the moment, but I hope that we can create a system that is fair to the staff and affordable to the country.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the social services budget. He must have prepared his question before I spoke, as I explained that there would be a £3 billion increase in the amount available to social services, so that they can match the extra money and effort from the NHS to provide an adequate mental health service for people in his area and in every other area.

We are determined to bring down waiting lists. They are coming down, and will continue to come down. Waiting times will also come down; by reducing waiting lists on the scale that we are, we shall ensure that waiting times come down, too.

We hear yet again the Liberal obsession with the extra 1p on income tax, which is spent on practically everything that one can think of. The Liberals must be the only party in history whose slogan is, "I want to spend a penny."

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): May I be the first to welcome warmly my right hon. Friend's announcement, which I am sure the population as a whole will recognise as the best possible way in which to celebrate 50 years of the national health service? I have two practical questions. First, does he share my experience that a common thread of the representations and complaints that we receive on the NHS relates to immense pressures at ward level on hard-pressed doctors and nurses? What, in practical terms, will the global amount of money mean at ward level in constituencies such as mine?

Secondly, may I warmly welcome the announcement on personal social services, which I believe has been a forgotten area of the caring professions for many years? Will my right hon. Friend give practical examples of the way in which the money will impact on personal social services and, indirectly, on the NHS locally?

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. and hard-working Friend for welcoming my statement and that of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on Tuesday. I agree that, in many ways, the worst aspect of the national health service—it is felt by many patients and people who visit them in hospital—is the fact that the staff are overstretched and run off their feet, and we want to reduce the impact of that by spending money on modernising wards.

That will help in some cases, because the layout of some wards—and the fact that they are clapped-out, ruinous and awful—means that the work is harder than it ought to be. We intend to recruit more nurses and doctors, which should relieve the pressure. We intend to try to extend the role of nurses, so that they can make a bigger professional contribution, which will also bring some relief.

[Mr. Dobson]

We hope that NHS Direct, the nurse-led 24-hour helpline, will employ nurses who have had to leave nursing, for instance because of a back injury acquired at work, to provide advice over the telephone. That will be a good way of making use of their nursing skills, and will reduce pressure.

We must try to stop people having to come into hospital when they do not want to and it is unnecessary. People in the health service, with our encouragement, have made substantial steps in that direction, especially last winter. I give again the example of Halton general hospital in Cheshire, where, when old folks who were admitted with a bad chest were discharged, a respiratory nurse team picked them up and looked after them at home. That worked so successfully that the GPs in the area started referring old folks who were having a bad chest at home to the respiratory team, so that they could be treated at home and did not have to go into hospital at all. A hospital is a dangerous place, and is the last place where frail old people should be, if it can possibly be avoided.

All those changes are intended to relieve the pressure on the hard-working people in the health service. It cannot be done overnight, but we have to recognise that those people are the health service.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I welcome any additional funding for the NHS, although it is not as much in real terms as the Secretary of State would have us believe, but how does he intend to deal with the serious GP shortages that currently exist, with approximately 1,000 vacancies, especially as evidence published in the past two weeks shows that GP list sizes, so effectively brought down by the previous Conservative Government, are rising again?

Mr. Dobson: It is a bit difficult for a Government who have been in power for only 14 months to take responsibility for the supply of doctors, when a doctor only now leaving medical school and beginning to do something useful probably started about 10 years ago—or did not start, which is one of our problems. We are dealing with the shortages, and, for the first time in ages, there has been a rise in the number of doctors becoming GP trainees, which is a step in the right direction.

Using the facilities made available by the previous Government, we are encouraging the appointment of salaried GPs in some of the areas where the shortages are worst, and we intend to continue, with other schemes that we are working out with the profession, to try to relieve the problem, but if we are to succeed, and to tackle health inequalities at the same time, our principal target must be to get better GP practice in those inner-city and other rundown areas where people are currently not getting a fair share of the resources.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I warmly welcome the statement and the extra 7,000 doctors and 15,000 nurses, but north-east Lancashire has been described as a dental desert, and, only this week, East Lancashire health authority is advertising in Scandinavia for additional dentists. Does my right hon. Friend have indicative figures for the number of additional dentists that we could expect to have in post at the end of this three-year period?

Mr. Dobson: The straightforward answer is no, I do not have those figures at the minute, but I can tell my hon. Friend that, as a result of the initiatives that we have taken in our short period in office, an extra 250,000 people have been able to become NHS dentistry patients.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): May I tell the Secretary of State that, only yesterday, as a result of an unfortunately heavy fall in Trafalgar square, I experienced the expertise and care of not only the London ambulance service, but the junior doctors, nurses and staff at St. Thomas's hospital? It was brilliant. I have no complaint. It was first class, but they were overstretched and under stress. Does the Secretary of State's announcement, particularly in respect of additional doctors and nurses, mean that that sort of stress and overstretch in an accident and emergency department at a hospital such as St. Thomas's will improve and that those who genuinely need more money for the wonderful work they do, particularly junior doctors and nurses, will get what they deserve—bigger remuneration?

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman rightly pays tribute to the people who looked after him, and I am sure that he is right in his observation that they are overstretched and under stress. With the proposals that I have outlined today I want to reduce that stress. Obviously, it will take a considerable time to bring that about in every part of the country, but that is what we want to do. I also want to see people who work in the national health service getting fair pay for the huge contribution that they make to the welfare of our people. I hope that we can manage that. We shall work hard to achieve it. Certainly, the extra money will assist us in that.

Audrey Wise (Preston): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the success of his efforts to improve the national health service? In particular, may I welcome his intention to improve services for children? I was pleased that he mentioned children being looked after by local authorities. Although he will not yet have had time to study the report on this subject issued today by the Select Committee on Health, will he ensure that he and his Department give it careful attention, because our recommendations will undoubtedly help him achieve his stated objectives? Finally, will he make sure that he never forgets the need to improve choice and continuity of carer for women in pregnancy and childbirth?

Mr. Dobson: Dealing with my hon. Friend's questions in reverse order, I shall do my very best not to forget what she has said about choice and continuity of carer for women in pregnancy and childbirth. In many parts of the country children's services have been a national disgrace. Children who, in effect, have had the state as their parent—

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Ealing.

Mr. Dobson: It is all very well shouting out a place name because it happens to be Labour controlled at the moment, but there are plenty of examples from all round the country. As all hon. Members know, if they are not just making stupid party-political points, there has been a group of organised child molesters getting appointments in all sorts of children's homes, some of which are run by

charities, or Labour authorities, Tory authorities and Liberal authorities. It is a disgrace that it has not been dealt with. We are trying to deal with it now.

Before I was interrupted, I was pointing out that if the children who, in effect, have had the state as their parent had been looked after by ordinary parents, those parents would have been prosecuted and gaoled for neglect. That shows how some children have been treated in children's homes; it must end. The Utting report made a large number of recommendations. I have been chairing a working group which has been going through them. We shall find the money to implement virtually all of them, and I hope to make announcements on that shortly. We shall certainly bear in mind the additional scrutiny of the Select Committee on Health.

It is intolerable that in many parts of the country, on reaching the age of 16 some children are just turned out by the local authority to fend for themselves. No hon. Members would have wanted that to happen to them or to their children or, possibly, in view of the age of some of us, grandchildren. That would be an intolerable concept. But that has been going on in our name as recently as last month, and it cannot go on any longer.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): It would be churlish not to congratulate the Secretary of State on securing from the Chancellor a financial settlement which goes at least a little of the way to matching his grandiloquent rhetoric, but may I bring him from the euphoria of the general to the specifics, because it is on the specifics that he will be judged by our electors? Will he ensure, as evidence of his good faith, that the Mount Vernon hospital at Northwood, the largest cancer hospital on a single site in the south of England, will not see its supporting burns, plastics and oral surgery, general medicine and general surgery removed, because, if they are, that cancer centre, with its outstanding research facilities, will go into a decline from which it may not be possible to recover?

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for what I have said. Like most people, I respond rather better to encouragement than criticism. I shall bear in mind the points that he makes about the Mount Vernon hospital, because the last thing that we want to see is good and effective treatment and care being taken away from anywhere.

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): As a nurse for more than 20 years, I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his amazing achievement in giving back to the people our health service and the security that it entails. All the professions respect him so much because he always demonstrates such a wide understanding of their work. But, looking at nurse recruitment, particularly in my constituency of Brentford and Isleworth in west London, does he agree that the problems facing people who want to recruit or retain student nurses, which we must address seriously, include accommodation and the cost of accommodation? The previous Government sold off nurses' homes, and that was encouraged. We now need to revisit the question of accommodation for our student nurses.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind welcome. Nurse recruitment is a major issue. Pay is one consideration, and accommodation is another. This is one of those circumstances where it is not easy to turn back the clock. The previous Government having sold off so many nurses' homes, it takes quite a bit of time to find alternative accommodation, if that is the right way to deal with the problem.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): If?

Mr. Dobson: In some areas it might be the right way, but in some areas it may not. The problem is that the previous Government pursued that policy in those areas where it might have been a sensible policy and in those areas where it was not. We are trying to address matters, such as accommodation, which either make nursing unattractive to someone who might be thinking of becoming a nurse or increasingly unattractive to people who are already nurses.

We are trying to establish more family-friendly employment policies so that nurses, whether men or women, with family responsibilities, can work the hours of the day, the days of the week, or, in some cases, because of school holidays, the weeks of the year that suit those responsibilities. Some hospitals manage to do that, and I do not understand why others cannot. They are, shall I say, being encouraged to follow the good examples.

We are also putting a great deal of effort into something else that is putting people off working in the health service: we are taking seriously assaults on and abuse of staff. We have taken steps within the health service to try to reduce that. My right hon. Friends the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary are also doing their bit through the judicial system and the police to ensure that if people commit offences, they are caught and prosecuted and, if they are successfully prosecuted, they get a rattling bad sentence. They should. It is quite wrong that the people working for us, trying to look after us, our friends and our neighbours, should be beaten up by anybody. There is no excuse for that, and we shall accept no excuse for it.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The Secretary of State has made much of the Government's spending plans, and I want to encourage him rather than criticise him, by saying that I broadly go along with them. However, the people of Worcestershire have three general hospitals, but face the axing of one of them. Kidderminster general hospital, which serves my constituents and those of the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock), is excellent and efficient, and it has won a chartermark, but its proposed closure is on the Secretary of State's desk. If his spending plans are accurate, can he promise my constituents and the people of Worcestershire that he will put a stop to that closure?

Mr. Dobson: I believe that we do not yet have the proposals on our desks, but I will use the excuse that they might be there, which means that it would be improper for me to make any promise one way or the other because it could be challenged in the courts. I shall carefully consider all the evidence. Unlike some of our predecessors, we are not supine when it comes to hospital closures, and we are not approving some of them.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): May I tell my right hon. Friend that his statement will be warmly welcomed by general practitioners and primary care nurses

[Dr. Howard Stoate]

throughout the country, and particularly in Dartford? How will the welcome modernisation fund be channelled into improving GP premises, some of which are sorely in need of modernisation?

Mr. Dobson: The funds will be channelled into areas where people say they are needed. We want to be positive, and to improve appalling GP premises in areas such as the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore). We have set the test of whether we would go to a GP who had premises like some of those in that constituency. The answer is no, and we should not tolerate the long-term existence of places that we would not use ourselves.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Health care is expensive, and costs are ever expanding as we live longer and technology advances. I read some research this morning that suggests that costs are growing at between two and two and a half times the rate of inflation in the United States. The assumptions underlying the Secretary of State's figures are based on a Treasury GDP deflator of 2.5 per cent., which is very optimistic and higher than this year's 2.9 per cent. Can the Secretary of State tell us what assumptions he has made for increases in staff costs over the next three to five years, and which NHS costs are likely to rise well ahead of the rate of inflation?

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman should remember that his party asserts that a 3 per cent. year on year real-terms increase is satisfactory. We are proposing 4.7 per cent.

Mr. Hammond: It is 3.7 per cent.

Mr. Dobson: It is 4.7 per cent. over the next three years, and 3.7 per cent. over five years. If we take a five-year average, the Tory figure falls to 3 per cent., not 3.1 per cent. I do not want to get into that kind of nonsense. The increase is 4.7 per cent. over the three years in question, which is a massive and steady improvement on anything that happened under the Tories. We are ensuring that the money is directed into providing necessary services.

We should not challenge assumptions on UK health costs by comparing them with figures from the United States, which spends twice as much of its national wealth on health, but where neither women nor men live as long as British women and men.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Judging by the questions posed by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), does my right hon. Friend agree that, in comparison, pointy-headed professors might have a reasonable grasp of what is going on in the health service?

In respect of primary care, today's announcement will be widely welcomed across the country, because we have a great deal to do to put the legacy right. Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in Birmingham, between 35 and 40 per cent. of GPs in the most deprived areas will be retiring in the next 10 years? We desperately need not only to increase the number of GPs but to make the necessary investment in primary care to ensure both that people have the quality of health care that they deserve, and that accident and emergency departments are able to provide an A and E service, instead of becoming, as happens all too often, a substitute for inadequate primary care.

Mr. Dobson: I certainly accept my hon. Friend's points. Clearly, we have to use all human and other resources possible both to try to improve the state of primary care in the most deprived parts of the country, and to put ourselves in readiness for the retirement of some GPs.

That is certainly one reason, albeit not the only one, why extending the role of nurses and district nurses to being nurse practitioners and other, similar measures will clearly make a contribution. We have a system in which large numbers of highly trained and skilled people are not permitted, under our present arrangements, to make full use of their skills and training to the advantage of the rest of us. That certainly applies to nurses and midwives, as well as to local pharmacists. Pharmacists do a four-year course, but frequently do little more than hand over pills in the local pharmacy. We want them to play a bigger role in primary care, which would be another way of getting more out of them, making their jobs more satisfying and, at the same time, providing a better all-round service.

My hon. Friend referred to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and I should come back to her.

Miss Widdecombe: Ah.

Mr. Dobson: I am going to apologise. I always do my level best to comply with the courtesies of the House in respect of informing the Opposition about things, so I am sorry that my office did not manage to get the statement to the right hon. Lady. I certainly cleared it before 3 o'clock, and I assumed that she would get it then.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the statement, especially the fact that we are looking three years ahead. Bearing in mind the fact that the Secretary of State, like myself and others, grew up with the old saying that half a loaf is better than no bread, may I nevertheless press the issue of the recruitment of staff? If we had new medical students going in this September or October, before they were fully qualified, that would be almost the 10 years up. At the same time, may I ask about the recruitment of nurses? Do we intend to advertise to bring nurses from overseas? What about therapists? We are putting cancer treatment high on our list, but there is a shortage of radiotherapists and radiographers.

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for my statement. Most of what I have been saying applies to Northern Ireland, and my colleagues will be trying to apply it there. He raises the issue of the difficulty in recruiting staff and it is no good my pretending that there is no difficulty in recruiting staff, be they doctors, nursing staff or, as he says, therapists, many of whom are in extremely short supply. It is difficult, because one cannot turn on a tap and have qualified therapists come out.

However, there is a substantial number of people who used to work in the national health service, but who left for one reason or another. There are about 140,000 nurses

and a substantial number of doctors. Dr. Ian Bogle, who has just become chairman of the British Medical Association and whom I congratulate on his election, was saying this morning that he thought that, given the right circumstances, we would be able to recruit doctors who had left the service back into it. I believe that that would apply also to nurses and to the professions allied to medicine. However, it will be a long, difficult and laborious task, which will have to be done locally in response to local circumstances.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Will my right hon. Friend send his congratulations to the staff at Grimsby hospital who have worked phenomenally hard to reduce its waiting lists? They are on target to reduce them by about 1,400 by next year. Before the general election, that hospital was in danger of being downgraded because the health authority was severely underfunded, thanks to the previous Government. I know that Grimsby hospital and all the residents of Grimsby and Cleethorpes will be delighted with my right hon. Friend's announcement today.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome for our actions. I certainly congratulate all the staff of Grimsby hospital on their work. I hope that they will receive their fair and proper share of the extra funds and that they will continue to be as efficient and productive as they are today.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We shall now move on to the business statement.

Business of the House

4.30 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I should like to make a statement about the business for next week.

MONDAY 20 JULY—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland Bill.

TUESDAY 21 JULY—Opposition Day (18th allotted day). Until about 7 pm, there will be a debate on the relationship of Government to Parliament, followed by a debate on the European single currency. Both debates will arise on motions in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

WEDNESDAY 22 JULY—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Government of Wales Bill.

Consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Bill.

THURSDAY AND FRIDAY 23 AND 24 JULY—Consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Bill.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 JULY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Bill.

TUESDAY 28 JULY—Consideration of any Lords amendments that may be received.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 pm.

WEDNESDAY 29 JULY—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, which will include the usual three-hour pre-recess debate.

Opposition Day (19th allotted day). The subjects for debate have yet to be decided and announced.

THURSDAY 30 JULY—Progress on remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Bill.

FRIDAY 31 JULY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Bill.

The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages which may be received.

I confirm that, subject to the progress of business, I expect the House to rise for the summer recess on Friday 31 July, and in the business statement next week I shall announce the return date in October.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The House is grateful to the right hon. Lady for next week's business, and for an indication of the business for the following week.

The House expects a number of announcements in the next few days, so will the Leader of the House tell us when we can expect, first, the statement on the transport White Paper and, secondly, that on local government finance? Will the right hon. Lady tell us also what other statements the Government plan to make before the recess? Will she ensure that Members whose constituencies are affected by the transport White Paper and the roads review are told about them before the media find out?

[Sir George Young]

The right hon. Lady has made no provision to debate the Legg report into the Sandline affair, which I understand is now expected before the House rises. Does not that warrant a statement and an early debate, not least because the Foreign Secretary is reported to have told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee this morning that he was certain that the report would support his claims of non-involvement? How can he make that assertion if the independent report is not available?

Last week, I asked the right hon. Lady when we might see the new guidelines on lobbying that the Cabinet Secretary has been asked to prepare. What is the position on those guidelines? Could we debate the Select Committee's report on London Underground, and could the House help the Deputy Prime Minister to find a workable way of privatising London Underground to replace the unworkable proposals on which he has embarked?

Finally, I refer the right hon. Lady to reports in today's newspapers that the Prime Minister has ordered Ministers to come up with policy announcements in August

"in an attempt to stop the government falling apart while he is on holiday."

The reports state that Alastair Campbell has

"sent an edict to all departments telling them to save up stories for the 'silly season'."

Can the right hon. Lady confirm that there is no question of delaying announcements so that they can be made when the House is not sitting?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): A very good idea.

Mrs. Taylor: I must take issue with my hon. Friend on that point. We are not saving up announcements that should be made, or are ready to be made, in the House so that they can be delivered at another time, such as during the recess.

The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about certain statements that may be made while the House is sitting. I expect various statements to come before the House in the next two weeks. I hope that the statement on the transport White Paper can be delivered next week. It is pencilled in for Monday, but, as I have explained before, we make provisional arrangements that must sometimes be changed. That is why we do not often announce statements in advance. If specific hon. Members are concerned about any Government decisions—whether they are announced by statement or through written parliamentary questions—I think that it is important that Ministers ensure that those hon. Members who are most affected are informed directly of the decisions that have been made.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked me about the Legg report, and whether there would be time to debate it before the House rises. He will know from my announcement that it is very unlikely that there will be time for such a debate. We do not know precisely when the Legg report will be published. It is an independent inquiry, and it is anticipated that its report will be produced in the House's final week of sitting. I hope that there will be at least a statement to the House following the publication of that report.

The right hon. Gentleman inquired about lobbying guidelines. I do not think that I have anything to add at this stage to my comments last week. We inherited guidelines, and we are considering whether they need to be tightened and improved. The Prime Minister has made the arrangements clear, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that the process should be rushed. It is important that we get any guidelines right.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about London Underground, I reject completely his suggestion that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has come up with unworkable proposals. As a member of the previous Government, who let investment in the London underground decline so badly, I think that the right hon. Gentleman has a cheek to ask that question.

As to the right hon. Gentleman's final point about policy announcements in August, although that suggestion might be welcomed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who thinks it is a good idea, I have received no such edict about withholding stories until August.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): In view of reports that the BBC wants to increase licence fees, will my right hon. Friend ensure that a statement is made to the House before the Government make any final decisions about the matter? It is also important to bear in mind the feelings of a large number—indeed, a majority—of Labour Back Benchers, leaving aside Parliamentary Private Secretaries, who have signed my early-day motion 1483.

[*That this House calls on the Government to give sympathetic consideration to a concessionary television licence scheme for pensioners; and hopes that such a scheme can be brought in within the lifetime of this Parliament.*]

In the light of the calls for restraint in public sector pay, is it not rather alarming that the press have reported today that the Director-General of the BBC, John Birt, has received a large pay increase, bringing his salary to nearly £390,000 a year? Many matters must be considered—quite apart from the agreement reached previously—before there is any question of increasing the licence fee again.

Mrs. Taylor: I think that my hon. Friend is requesting a debate on the licence fee rather than the other issues involved with it. The level of television licence fees for the years 1997-98 to 2001-2 is determined by a five-year formula, which takes into account the BBC's spending needs over the whole period. The Government have no plans to change that formula, so I think that it would be inappropriate to give priority to a debate of that nature at this stage.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am sure that, especially as the Leader of the House comes to this session every week, she is well aware of the pressure from Back Benchers for increasing time for business, but may I draw her attention to the pressure from Ministers, who are becoming so frustrated by the lack of time in the House that they are absolutely forced to go to the media in default of coming to the Chamber? Will she give the House an assurance that some of the ideas that are being canvassed for improving the speed and effectiveness of

the work of the House will see the light of day before the recess, and that, soon after the start of the autumn session, we shall have an opportunity to debate those matters and improve the accountability and effectiveness of that work?

Mrs. Taylor: Without accepting all the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, I hope that we shall be able to make further progress in modernising the workings of the House. He asked whether the next Committee report could be published before the recess. Ideally, I would like that to be the case, and I know that members of the Committee will work hard over the next few weeks, hopefully meeting whenever it is necessary, to try to make progress and agree a report. If that were to be possible, we might well be able to hold a further debate on modernisation in the spillover period, but I believe that some work remains to be done by the Committee before a report is ready.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When may we debate the recent report by Age Concern and the Alzheimer's Society on the huge problem of the over-medication of the elderly, especially the evidence that one in five hospital admissions of elderly people results from the misuse of medicinal drugs, and the evidence from Glasgow and the north of England that in one case 54 per cent., and in another case 88 per. cent. of residents of care homes were being prescribed very powerful neuroleptic drugs inappropriately? A very effective review by the school of psychiatry in Manchester reduced the number of drugs used by the elderly, thereby greatly improving the quality of their life, extending their life expectancy and saving money for the health service. When shall we replicate those studies nationally?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend will understand if I cannot promise him time in the near future for the debate he requests. I hope, however, that the reforms that the Secretary of State for Health announced only a short time ago in respect of Social Services and help for the elderly may assist with some of the problems that concern him. If my hon. Friend wants to pursue the matter further, he could apply for an Adjournment debate, but I do not think that there is a possibility of holding such a debate in Government time before the recess.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I imagine that the Leader of the House will not yet have had an opportunity to read the Wyndham report, written by Tony Travers and published yesterday, on the economic impact of London's west end theatre, one of the great successes of my constituency, but may I hope that we might hold a debate upon it while it is still fresh in everyone's mind?

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman is right—I have not read the entire Wyndham report. However, I understand that the report reveals a vibrant industry and a British success story as far as London's west end theatres are concerned, and I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on having them in his constituency. They are clearly very important to the British economy as well as to the British Tourist Authority. He too will understand why we cannot have a debate in Government time before the recess.

There is always the opportunity for an Adjournment debate. There is also the pre-recess three-hour Adjournment debate, which hon. Members find extremely useful for raising topics that they have not been able to weave into our parliamentary timetable on other occasions.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Given the pressure on time, and parliamentary realities, would my right hon. Friend ask the Foreign Secretary, who will open tomorrow's debate on the expansion of NATO, which some of us, including ex-Senator Sam Nunn and other serious Americans, regard with foreboding and dismay, whether there could be a statement on the military position in Kosovo? May I hark back yet again and nag my right hon. Friend that the House of Commons should be consulted before there is any commitment to military action?

Mrs. Taylor: I am happy to bring my hon. Friend's comments to the Foreign Secretary's attention. I have previously said that we cannot give an absolute undertaking that an oral statement will be made before any decision to deploy troops, but I can confirm that, operational circumstances permitting, we would do so. I have said that on other occasions; I repeat it today, but I shall again remind the Foreign Secretary of my hon. Friend's concerns.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Given hon. Members' intense interest in the statement earlier today by the Secretary of State for Health, and the understandable focus on the extra expenditure within the NHS, I express a hope that the right hon. Lady will share my concern that personal social services and the extra expenditure that was being targeted on that area were not adequately covered in questions on the statement.

I therefore wonder two things. First, will a statement be made before the recess on the White Paper on social services, to enable us to explore the Government's approach to social services in the medium to long term? Secondly, will there be an opportunity for a debate in Government time on personal social services? I understand that most of the debates on that subject in recent years have been Adjournment debates. Surely there should be time in which we might test the Government's views on that subject in Government time.

Mrs. Taylor: In Government time, we had a wide-ranging debate on the Health Service last week, when some of those issues were relevant. I cannot add anything to what I said about statements. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Liberals have an Opposition day next week; had they felt that that issue should have priority, it would have been open to them to choose that instead of the subjects that are on the Order Paper.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): The right hon. Lady is aware, as I have raised the matter with her several times, that West Sussex county council has been obliged to go to the High Court to seek redress against an over-mighty and overbearing Executive which is seeking to place upon the people of West Sussex, and especially upon my constituents in Mid-Sussex, substantial numbers of extra new houses over and above that already budgeted for. Is she aware that the judge is now considering his view of the matter, the representations having been made?

[Mr. Nicholas Soames]

Would the President be good enough to say whether she might be prepared, when the House returns, to grant time for a debate on the outcome of those deliberations, as they will fundamentally affect the planning law and legislation on the building of new houses throughout the country for the foreseeable future?

Mrs. Taylor: It is difficult enough at this stage to plan the next two weeks, and I cannot at the moment make any commitments such as those that the hon. Gentleman is asking me to make.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the Leader of the House tell us whether the regulations extending conditional fee arrangements will be debated in Committee upstairs or on the Floor of the House, and when such debate will take place? The delay in introducing these proposals, ill thought out though they may be, is causing difficulties for the insurance market. Unless the extension of CFAs, as they are called, is underpinned by insurance, it simply will not happen.

Mrs. Taylor: There are no plans at the moment to debate those regulations on the Floor of the House. I cannot be specific about timing, but I shall ensure that, once a decision is taken, the hon. and learned Gentleman is informed.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Appropriation Act 1998.

Data Protection Act 1998.

Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998.

Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council Act 1998.

Public Expenditure

[Relevant documents: Minutes of Evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on Wednesday 15 July (HC 960-ii).]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Madam Speaker: I understand that many right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak in the debate. For that reason I have announced that Back-Bench speeches will be limited to 15 minutes.

4.48 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): This is the first opportunity that the House has had to debate the Government's public expenditure plans. I shall set in context the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Tuesday, which represented a further step by the Government in implementing their manifesto commitments.

In his first two Budgets, the Chancellor had to deal with the structural problems that we inherited. Last month, he set out his fiscal strategy in the economic and fiscal strategy report which laid out a prudent and cautious approach to public spending that was widely welcomed. This week, he set out our spending strategy—increased investment, but money in return for modernisation. Investment is conditional on reform. Every Department will be bound by an agreement to deliver key outcomes on which it will be judged.

The Government's central objectives are high and sustainable levels of growth and employment and sustainable public services, built on a platform of long-term stability. We have put in place two fundamental long-term economic reforms to ensure that we get long-term sustainable economic growth, and to ensure that public spending is affordable.

First, we had to deal with the previous Government's failure to deal with inflation, which was left rising out of control, so we gave independence to the Bank of England, with the result that our long-term interest rates are the lowest that they have been for 33 years. Secondly, to impose a new framework of financial discipline, we have adopted fiscal rules that achieve a current budget balance and a prudent level of debt to national income.

It is interesting to note that even the most pessimistic of the 45 independent economic forecasts that we surveyed show that our strict rules will be met over the next three years. We have kept to the two-year spending limits that we promised at the election while we sorted out the mess that we inherited. We have imposed a significant fiscal tightening—£25 billion—which is some $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of national income.

We have reduced the borrowing that we inherited. During the 1990s, national debt doubled. As a result, we were faced with a bill of £25 billion a year just to service that debt. That was the golden economic legacy to which the Opposition keep referring. We inherited a situation of boom and bust. Under the Conservatives, interest rates reached 15 per cent., and inflation doubled in two and a half years to almost 10 per cent. in 1990. We will not repeat the mistakes of the late 1980s—the Lawson boom—the economic miracle of the 1980s that became the economic nightmare of the 1990s, when the shadow Chancellor was at the heart of the Treasury.

Over this economic cycle and for the first time in decades, Britain is set to have both a current budget in balance and a sustainable approach to debt. Over the three years 1996–97 to 1999–2000, public sector net borrowing will fall by 3½ per cent. of national income, just as set out in the Budget figures. The ratio of net public debt is projected to fall below 40 per cent. of GDP.

Although we are boosting spending on capital, which we believe is important, we plan that the debt ratio will remain below 40 per cent. Our approach is among the most prudent of our G7 partners, and far more prudent than that of the Government from whom we took over.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Many definitions have been changed. Can he confirm that, on the basis of what was called the public sector borrowing requirement, the Government are running a PSBR of £4 billion next year, £5 billion the following year, and £6 billion in each of the two years after that?

Mr. Darling: That is the point that the hon. Gentleman put to the Chancellor yesterday at the Treasury Select Committee. My right hon. Friend made it clear that, unlike the situation under the previous Government, we are determined to reduce the amount of borrowing so that we can have sustainable public finances in the future.

In the economic and fiscal strategy report that we published last month, the hon. Gentleman will have seen that we have a far stricter and more open discipline than ever existed under the previous Government. There is a further innovation. The new regime breaks with the old-fashioned culture of short-termism and uncertainty. We believe that moving away from the annual negotiating cycle and the annual spending round, and introducing fixed three-year budgets, will give Departments, and therefore the public service, far more certainty than they ever had in the past.

The Government have set tough new long-term fiscal rules. To ensure that those are met and to ensure long-term investment in our infrastructure, we have separate current and capital budgets for each Department, which will ensure that capital investment is sustained.

The fiscal rules that we have adopted are rigorous. Over the economic cycle, they will bring the current budget into balance. To meet our fiscal rules, and in line with cautious and published assumptions, we plan current surpluses in the next three years of £7 billion, £10 billion and £13 billion.

We have adopted an approach that is cautious and prudent, in contrast to the previous Government's approach. In the last economic cycle, the average current budget deficit was more than 1½ per cent. of GDP—the equivalent of £12 billion a year.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): If, as the Chief Secretary says, the Government intend to reduce borrowing, why does he plan to increase it?

Mr. Darling: I explained to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) that, under the Conservative Government, over the economic cycle there was a current deficit equivalent to more than £12 billion a year. We have taken a deliberately prudent and cautious approach and budgeted for a surplus in each of the next three years. That demonstrates this Government's commitment to being prudent and cautious, which is in complete contrast to the position adopted by the previous Government, who even in the good times, ran up debts that were unsustainable.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): What is the point of the right hon. Gentleman banging on about a current surplus, when the total figures add up to a deficit? Every newspaper that the Government spin to says that we have a surplus, but the surplus is in the current spending. The total figures add up to a deficit.

Mr. Darling: We are budgeting for a current surplus because we believe it is important that current expenditure is covered by taxation. That was not happening under the previous Government. They were running up debts far greater than they could ever reduce. We believe that if we are to have sustainable public finances, current expenditure ought to be financed by taxation.

With regard to investment and capital expenditure, we believe that the Government should be prepared to borrow, because the benefit will come over a number of years. Even so, the total amount that the Government borrow will reduce. That is in contrast with what happened over much of the previous 18 years.

Mr. Maude: How on earth does the right hon. Gentleman arrive at the conclusion that he is reducing borrowing, when his own plans, based on very optimistic assumptions, show borrowing going up every year and the absolute size of the national debt increasing every year? Let him not mislead the House in this way.

Mr. Darling: As I was explaining to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), the Government believe that we should be prepared to borrow when we are investing for capital, but we believe that current expenditure ought to be covered by taxation. Conservative Members are in no position to lecture us. Because of the irresponsibility of the previous Government, we were left huge levels of debt, which we have had to reduce.

As for the remarks of the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) about optimistic forecasts, we have taken a deliberately cautious and prudent approach to how much the Government can spend over the next few years. I know that there are some who wanted us to spend more, including, it seems, some Tory spokesmen. However, we are determined to take a prudent and affordable approach.

It is only because we are taking that approach and setting ourselves a tough framework that we can take the necessary action to reverse the chronic under-investment in our country's health, education, transport and housing infrastructure. As I said, the key difference from the past is that we are making additional investment, but we are demanding reform in return for that.

All new resources will be conditional on the implementation of essential reforms. We have set ourselves a clear target for modern, efficient and effective services. The House will see that in each chapter of the White Paper, departmental objectives are set out. It is money for modernisation. Every Minister knows that he or she is working to deliver those objectives. There are

[Mr. Darling]

new targets for each area of public service, new standards of efficiency that will have to be met to ensure that every penny is well spent.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Does not the right hon. Gentleman realise that he is deceiving himself when he says that his projections for deficit and debt are based on prudent forecasts? They are not at all. If the forecasts for growth—the right hon. Gentleman knows that such projections are extremely sensitive to growth assumptions—are those set out in the Red Book of 1.75 per cent. this year, 2 per cent. next financial year and 2.25 per cent. in the following two years, they are extremely optimistic. They are desperately over-optimistic at a time when the economy is turning down and manufacturing is already in recession.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that we have taken a more pessimistic view than the Government whom he used to support. We are not taking credit, for example, for asset sales which the previous Government assumed and never had any intention of realising. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber earlier when I made the point that there have been about 45 independent economic forecasts in the past few weeks, and that in respect of every one of them we shall meet the objectives set out in our fiscal rules. We are taking a cautious and prudent approach, which stands in stark contrast to what happened—

Mr. Gibb *rose*—

Mr. Darling: No, I shall not give way at the moment.

Our approach stands in stark contrast to what we had for 18 years. Something else that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who I think is now a member of the Opposition Front Bench team, should bear in mind is that although the Conservative party is criticising us and suggesting that we are spending too much, a number of Opposition spokesmen and spokeswomen—for example, the Opposition spokeswoman on health—are demanding that we should be spending more. They cannot have it both ways. However, I note that the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer had a go at that. Yesterday, on the "Today" programme, he was asked:

"Mr. Maude, can you really have it both ways—asking for increased spending but opposing overall increased spending?"

The right hon. Member for Horsham replied, "Of course we can." The truth is that the Opposition cannot have it both ways. We are either spending too much or too little. The Opposition should work out which side they are on.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The interest payments on the national debt are about £25 billion, and that sum is based on present interest rates. What if over the next two years interest rates fall from 7.5 per cent. to 7 per cent. and perhaps to 6 per cent? Does that mean that the £25 billion devoted to interest payments will fall to less than £20 billion? If so, does not that mean that an extra £5 billion could be released and made available again for public expenditure?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend should be aware that we believe that we shall be spending about £5 billion less a year in servicing debt as a result of the programme that we have set out than we would have been if we had just left the situation as we inherited it.

I was referring to the importance of securing reform in return for investment. I shall give a couple of examples of what I mean. First, let us take health. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made clear in his statement earlier this afternoon, we are increasing investment in health but in return for that we are looking to improve the value that we derive from spending on medicines. We are looking for improved efficiency. Already £1 billion of savings over the Parliament will be transferred from red tape, following the abolition of the internal market, to front-line patient care.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Darling: In one moment.

It is worth noting that some hospitals are 20 per cent. more efficient than others. We want to ensure that that discrepancy in the performance of national health service trusts is tackled so that we get the best possible value for the money that we are spending.

As for education, in 1996 only 57 per cent. of 11-year-olds met literacy standards while only 54 per cent. met numeracy standards. We set new and higher targets to be delivered by the year 2002. That is a clear example—

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Darling: I am about to give way to my right hon. Friend.

In education there is a clear example of where we are increasing investment but demanding a far higher return and higher standards in return for it.

Mr. Sheldon: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of making sure that we get value for money before we release further moneys. That turns on how previous investment has been progressing. I note that there will be a Cabinet committee to deal with these matters, presumably chaired by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Will my right hon. Friend say something about this committee? It is obviously going to be a very important committee and something akin to the Star Chamber committee that we had under Willie Whitelaw. How does that leave my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary in connection with such a powerful committee? I know that my right hon. Friend's position will not be diminished because I expect him to move to many higher things. However, will he say something about the process itself?

Mr. Darling: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I will not speculate on where the Chief Secretary may be left after all this. That is for somebody else. The important point that my right hon. Friend makes relates to the audit of what happens to the additional investment. During consideration of the comprehensive spending review the Public Expenditure Committee, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had set up, came to the view that if we were to increase spending, especially where

there was to be quite a significant increase, as in health and education, it was crucial to ensure that we obtained some real benefit and real gain from it.

There have been occasions in the past—Conservatives may point to this—where expenditure was increased on health, for example, but it did not necessarily result in a better outcome in terms of improved health care. Indeed, part of the increase in spending on health under the Conservatives was to set up the internal market. We want to keep investment under review, which is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has agreed that there will be a committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, that will carry out a constant review of performance so that we will see that we are getting the value for money that we want and all the reforms that have been set out. That is something that Governments in the past have neglected. It is very important that we are satisfied that if we increase spending, as we are doing in health and education particularly, as well as across the board, we can see some gain from it.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) *rose—*

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I hope that the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman will not be put out if I give way first to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell).

Mr. Boswell: As the right hon. Gentleman sets great store by investment and as he has said, plausibly enough, that he wishes to receive greater benefit from public investment, will he tell the House what his estimate is of the increased annual rate of return that he is seeking from a marginal increase in investment?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that each Department is responsible for delivering the improvements in standards and so on that have been set out. *[Interruption.]* As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear, the public service agreements that have been reached between the Treasury and the Departments will be published. At that time the hon. Gentleman and the entire House will be able to see the nature of these agreements and then judge the progress that Departments make.

Mr. MacGregor: When the public service agreements are published, I hope we shall see that they are quantified in considerable detail. If that is the position, what will happen in the proposed committee's reviews if a Department fails to meet the targets? Will money actually be withdrawn from that Department?

Mr. Darling: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear, in both health and education money will be released only if the Government are satisfied that we are getting the returns that we want. One of the advantages of having a constant review of expenditure is that it should be possible at a far earlier stage than in the past to identify if we are not getting the reforms and improvements that we want to see.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: That sounds as if the Chancellor of the Exchequer has the right to claw back money if things go wrong. I wanted to press the right hon. Gentleman on why the Government will not give an inflation-proofing guarantee. They are very confident in their forecasts, but if things go wrong because of inflation, that is outside departmental control. They can do nothing about inflation. The Prime Minister said that the forecasts were good, irrespective of the economic circumstances, but the Chancellor told me that these are cash limits and there will be no change even if inflation goes outside the forecast. Why will the right hon. Gentleman not give a guarantee on things that Departments cannot control?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman might have started by congratulating us on giving a significant, above-inflation increase to investment in health and education. The health service will receive a £21 billion increase while the Liberals wanted an increase of only £2½ billion. They wanted £6 billion for education, and we have increased expenditure in that area by £19 billion. The point that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was making to the hon. Gentleman yesterday, I think, at the Select Committee on Treasury Affairs, is that Departments have been given their departmental expenditure limits and they are expected to live within them. Certainly in the cases of health and education they have a significant increase in expenditure, and that allows them to plan their provision for the next three years. They are real-terms increases.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify that he meant what he appeared to be saying to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor)? Put in practical terms, did he mean that the Treasury will withdraw the promise of additional funds for the health service and reduce provision to it if the Chancellor's Committee discovers that health waiting lists have gone up and the Secretary of State has not achieved the reductions that he is promising?

Mr. Darling: I was not suggesting anything of the sort, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman well knows. I said that we have made it clear that the sums that we have allocated to health and to education will be released in return for reform. The point of the Committee is to ensure that we are making steady progress in reducing waiting lists, among other things. One of the advantages of considering these matters constantly, and not waiting until the end of an annual review, as in the past, or a three-year period, is that problems, for example in reducing waiting lists, can be dealt with far earlier and more effectively.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman, who was Secretary of State for Health some years ago, knows that many things contribute to reducing waiting lists in the health service—not only money, which is clearly important, but management, because performance can vary substantially between different hospitals and trusts. Over the past few months, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has, among other things, been using some of the additional money that we have already allocated to identify management failures and administrative problems in getting waiting lists down. The point of having a Cabinet Committee to review these things is to ensure that we can take action to achieve improvements where performance is not coming up to the mark.

My point in respect of the modernisation fund is about incentive. We can effectively encourage hospitals to improve standards if they know that they can get

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additional funds to improve their performance. We have been doing that over the past few months, and it has worked extremely well.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: No, I want to make progress. I shall try to give way to the hon. Gentleman later, but Madam Speaker has said that many hon. Members want to contribute and Back Benchers tend to complain if Front Benchers take up most of the time. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I have sensed the mood of the House quite well.

It has struck us over the past year that many Departments could be far more efficient than they have been in the past. On defence, there are savings to be gained from improved procurement measures, and the agreement on targets will enable the Ministry of Defence to do that. The Government have not only put in place firm spending disciplines, but will ensure that they deliver the results that we want to achieve.

We have considered whether resources are targeted effectively, and over half the additional resources have gone to our priorities, health and education. We are getting rid of assets that we do not need and the MOD, for example, is selling property in central London so that resources can be diverted to the front line. The Foreign Office is to sell property that it does not need to finance services elsewhere, and we are making increasing use of the national asset register which, for the first time, showed what the Government own.

Far greater emphasis has been put on prevention, because it makes sense to tackle the causes of crime and the causes of poor health rather than leaving the public purse to pick up the pieces. We are helping young children to get the best possible start, we have introduced a new crime prevention strategy and we are dealing with the problems of drug misuse.

In addition, public spending has an important role in raising the rate of sustainable growth. In the global economy, the skills and training of the work force will mark Britain out as a place to invest. As we have shown, our priority in education is absolutely clear: we have achieved a record 5.1 per cent. average increase in spending over the next three years, which contrasts extremely favourably with the previous Government's record.

To deliver a more efficient economy, we need to invest in a first-class science base. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear, the Government have increased science spending by £1.1 billion and we have set up a public-private partnership with the Wellcome Trust to create a pool of £600 million which will be available to further scientific research. That is, of course, in addition to the £50 million challenge fund announced in the Budget, which will bring science and industry closer together so that good research ideas can be converted into good business ideas. That clearly demonstrates the Government's commitment to the future.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Daresbury laboratory is in my constituency. Since 1993, I have been pressing Governments to invest in the next generation of synchrotron radiation research, and £100 million of expenditure has been announced to replace the synchrotron radiation source at Daresbury. We have not yet convinced the Government that the next £100 million should be invested at Daresbury, but I press on my right hon. Friend the fact that that investment is needed. If it comes to my constituency, I shall be absolutely delighted.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of scientific investment, and he will no doubt press my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on that point.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will all the Wellcome funds be independently refereed? Will the Treasury exercise such pressure as it can to get rid of the dreadful system of short-term, postgraduate contract research posts, which are causing such agony? People spend their lives going from year to year on such contracts, without knowing what their future will be. If pressure could be applied to do something about that, it would be a great help and vastly more efficient in terms of science.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend knows that I represent a city that has three universities, and I am well aware of the problems to which he refers. I hope that my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade will be able to make a further announcement in due course. I cannot promise that all the problems that have been visited on us will be resolved, but most people working in the scientific field will welcome the additional investment here.

Also important is the need to invest not only in education, but in transport. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will publish his White Paper on transport—the first for a generation—next week. It will set out the importance that the Government attach to public and private sector partnerships, which will increase investment in public transport. We are also increasing investment in housing repairs. Each Department will draw up an investment strategy by early next year, and they will be published so that people can see the difference that the investment will make.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Darling: Once more, then I shall make giant strides towards the end of my speech.

Dr. Jones: On Tuesday, I said that the Government deserved to be praised through the roof for the extra money for science, but I am a little disappointed on housing. I am concerned about the amount of investment that is going into housing, and I have figures from the Library showing that we spent £4 billion on housing investment in real terms in 1985–86. In the current year, even with the capital receipts, the total is about £2 billion—half that figure. What will be the figure next year? Will it get up even to the poor showing of 1985–86?

Mr. Darling: May I acknowledge my appreciation of my hon. Friend praising the Government? It is perhaps worth a few moments of silence to savour that. It was perhaps too much to hope that my hon. Friend would sit down without going on to make a further point.

There are two points to be made in respect of housing. First, as in all matters, the Government had to start from the point at which they took over—investment in public sector housing had reduced substantially. Secondly, we have to be consistent with the fiscal rules to which I referred, so that growth in current expenditure and in capital investment are sustainable and affordable. I believe that the increase in housing investment is affordable and will be sustainable. It will be very much welcomed, not only by local authorities and housing associations, but, more important, by those who live in local authority and housing association property. There are major renovation and improvements initiatives and increased maintenance. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), on this and other matters, might like to have seen much much more, but the Government had to take a view on how much they could afford across the whole pattern of Government spending. The £3.6 billion increase over the period will be widely welcomed.

I want to deal with welfare reform to which the Government attach a great deal of importance. We have introduced the new deal, we have reformed the Child Support Agency and student finances and we are reforming legal aid. We said two things in our manifesto. We said that we would increase the share of national income spent on education—we have done that—and we said that we would reduce the bills for economic and social failure, which we are doing. By any view, the rate of increase in the amount that the Government will be spending on social security will be half that of the previous Government. By the end of this Parliament, it will be lower as a proportion of national income than the level we inherited.

I find the Conservative party's attitude rather curious. Yesterday—no doubt it will be the same today—Conservative Members criticised us because they said that social security spending would be increasing by £27 billion. We should look at where that increase is going. Help for pensioners accounts for over half the increase, help for the disabled and the provision of sickness benefit is taking up about a quarter and the increase in child benefit accounts for the bulk of the rest.

If Conservative Members say that we are spending too much, what would they cut? Would they cut pensions, disability benefits or the extra money for child benefit? There is a distinction between spending on pensions, disability payments and on child benefit for children most in need and the money we have been spending in the past because we have had far too many people on the dole when they could have been in work. The new deal, which the Conservative party opposes, has seen 60,000 young people go into work or take up other opportunities and nearly 40,000 lone parents are now in work rather than being dependent on benefit.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: Not just now.

The number of lone parents on benefit is now below 1 million for the first time in many years. We have tackled the waste that we said we would tackle. In our manifesto we promised to do more for families in need and that is why we increased child benefit by a record amount. At the same time, we have been able to improve the position of many pensioners, which is something else that we promised in our manifesto.

Conservative Members cannot have it both ways. If they think that we are spending too much on pensions, child benefit and on helping the disabled—all the things we said we would do—they have to say what they would cut.

That is not the only thing that Conservative Members have to explain. Conservative Members are saying that we are spending far too much money—that is the view of the shadow Chancellor—while, at the same time, some Opposition spokesmen and women are saying that they want to spend more on health, education, pensions and defence. They must explain which view is right. Do they want more or less money to be spent? I am inclined to believe the view of the shadow Chancellor because he is an extremely important person in the Opposition and because the Leader of the Opposition was saying the same yesterday.

Mr. Loughton: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: Not just now.

Over half the increase in spending is going on health and education. If we are spending too much, we are entitled to ask which schools and hospitals, up and down the country, the Conservative party would close. If Conservative Members believe that we are spending too much on pensions, by how much would they reduce that spending? If we are spending too much on child benefit, would they cut that? The shadow Chancellor and the shadow Chief Secretary have to explain how they can reconcile their criticism about us spending too much with the fact that during proceedings on the Finance Bill they moved amendments which would cost £6 billion to fund. How on earth can they justify that?

The Opposition are beginning to make their position clear. The shadow Chancellor, and the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, showed that the Conservative party is again lurching further to the right. Last year at the Tory party conference fringe the shadow Chancellor said:

"When a right of centre party moves to the right, it can become more popular."

I do not know whether that view is shared by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), but it is clearly the way that the Front Bench representatives of the Conservative party want to go. The shadow Chancellor has made it clear that public services should depend more on charity and private provision. He sees a reduced role for the Government and the state in providing a decent service in the NHS or an education service that gives every child the opportunity it deserves.

We believe in public services because education is the key to our country's future. We believe that the NHS is the mark of a civilised, decent and fair society. We believe in the value of public transport because it is good for people, good for the environment and good for the country. We believe that the Government have a role to ensure that we do everything we can to reduce crime.

The comprehensive spending review has shown how the Government have been able, against a sound and prudent fiscal background, to provide for sustainable

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public finances in the future. It has also shown how we can divert finances to our priority areas so that we can build a strong and fair society and so that we can have spending based on long-term economic stability and affordable public services. The comprehensive spending review has also shown how the Government, step by step and line by line, are delivering on all their election promises.

5.25 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): We can always tell when the Chief Secretary has lost the plot, because he returns to completely phoney allegations about what we are alleged to have done during the Finance Bill proceedings. We make no apologies for resisting Labour party tax increases. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot distinguish taxation from expenditure, it explains a lot about the mess he got into over the comprehensive spending review.

On Tuesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the biggest increase in public expenditure ever contemplated by a peacetime Government. Spending, particularly spending other people's money, is the easy part of politics. The difficult task is to increase and improve the productive potential of the economy or, perhaps at the same time, to find offsetting savings to match areas of expenditure that need to be increased in line with changing political priorities. That was the task that the Government should have set themselves and it was the task they failed.

Instead, the comprehensive spending review is not really a review at all; it is a comprehensive spending increase. The Government have locked into the expenditure for three years hence and, at the same time, they are taking a huge and unnecessary risk with the performance of the economy.

To be fair, the Government showed considerable ingenuity in dressing up the figures.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall give way in a minute, but I should like the hon. Gentleman to listen to this point.

As much is concealed in these figures as is revealed by the document. Spin doctoring has given way to spin accounting. That is hardly surprising, as the Paymaster General—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Oh, yes. The Paymaster General is quite happy to publish accounts showing disbursements, but then somehow the payments never get made. That is not my view; it is the view of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Perhaps the same thinking suffuses the documents before us. Perhaps the accountancy figures will never be paid. Perhaps the public services will never see the money supposedly allocated to them on Tuesday.

The other big disguise was over what is perhaps the central failure, which was to find those offsetting savings in welfare reform—I shall return to that.

Mr. Mike Hall: If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that the social security bill is too high, will he tell us what parts of it he would cut?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall come on to welfare reform specifically and come back to the point raised by the hon. Gentleman.

The Government have put up a smokescreen of changed definitions and accountancy changes which is designed to make comparisons difficult. We have had to enlist the help of the Library to find out what is really happening to the public accounts. Ingenuity in presenting the figures is not enough. The Chancellor has committed himself to a three-year programme of expenditure just as the economy is faltering. It is beyond dispute that manufacturing and exporting are going into recession. The growth projections in the Government's documents, the strategy report and others are a fantasy for those sectors.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the long-term growth rate for the past four years was 2.3 per cent. and that the growth rate in the past year was 3 per cent. above the 2.25 per cent. medium-term forecast? Does he also accept that the assumed rate for 1998-99 is 1.75 per cent., which is not particularly high, and that the following year it will rise to 2 per cent. and then go to 2.25 per cent? Record inward investment last year created 46,000 new jobs and retained 100,000. That shows that we are in good shape and that the Government's assumptions are prudent and cautious. What is more, they will lead to a current account surplus of £30 billion in the three years.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman ask some manufacturing firms in his constituency whether they will grow by 2.25 or 2.5 per cent. this year. They will tell him, as they are telling us, that they are already in recession. The projected growth figure of 2.25 per cent. is for them already a fantasy, and we have not even begun the three-year period. On that matter, the Government are going wrong already.

As I have said, manufacturing and exporting are in recession. That will get worse, because there is a growing mismatch, a conflict, between the Treasury's tax and spending decisions, which by and large are inflationary, and the Bank of England's tight monetary policy, which is designed to get down to the inflation target of a Government who have raised interest rates and the value of the pound.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I cannot understand what fantasy land the right hon. Gentleman is living in. Why has Vauxhall in my constituency just taken on 1,000 new workers? In two weeks, members of the royal family will visit the latest major investment in my constituency. I cannot see where the right hon. Gentleman's logic is taking us. In the real world, there are real jobs. Why does he not get back to the real world?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman has probably noticed that the claimant count for

unemployment has started to go up. That will soon affect his constituency: it has certainly started to affect mine. If he does not believe the figures that I have quoted, perhaps he will agree with those that have been produced by the Office for National Statistics, which has reported that the manufacturing and exporting sectors of the economy are now in recession and that output has fallen for two successive quarters. Does the hon. Gentleman accept those figures, which emanate from his Government?

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) does not believe the statistics, he could ask the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Yes, they should sort it out between themselves. The Opposition are entitled to rely on official statistics that have been published by the Office for National Statistics. They confirm beyond doubt that those sectors of the economy are in recession. If that has not hit the hon. Gentleman's constituency, all that I can say to him is, "Watch out," because it soon will.

It is not an opinion but a fact that the economy is distorted and manufacturing is affected by the high pound and high interest rates. Meanwhile, the extra spending that is signalled in the review will add to pressures on the Bank of England. A looser expenditure policy will cause interest rates to remain high for longer than would otherwise have been the case and it may increase them further. The increases that were signalled by the Chancellor on Tuesday could drive the economy further into recession.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I am trying to grasp the right hon. Gentleman's meaning. The Opposition say that public expenditure is too high. Which of the public services of health, education and anti-crime policy would the right hon. Gentleman cut?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will contain himself until I come to deal with the details in the public expenditure document. At this point in my speech, I am setting out the economic background and showing that the entire strategy rests on foundations that the Government are removing one by one.

It may be unfashionable to rely on the claimant count as a measure of unemployment, but it is an arithmetic fact that that count has risen for two months. Even if the Government dismiss that as being an accurate estimate of unemployment, the increase is already adding to expenditure from the social security budget. Under the Government, social failure bills are going up. It is remarkable that the Government's strategy report assumes no increase in unemployment. That is not just unusual; it is extremely foolish. Page 42 of that report states:

"Unemployment is assumed flat at its April level."

The Government assume that, throughout the three-year period, unemployment will remain at what might be the all-time low that was achieved in the spring or summer of this year. That is a totally unrealistic assumption, and it means that the social security projections in the documents are already unrealistically low.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that alternative statistics show that, in the past three months, the claimant count has gone down by 54,000? What is more, when the previous Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who is in his place, carried out this analysis, instead of assuming stable unemployment he assumed that it would fall. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman should ask his right hon. and learned Friend. It is true. The Conservatives say that we are imprudent. When they were in government, they were imprudent.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We bequeathed to the Government a golden economic legacy of sustainable growth, steady inflation and falling unemployment. It is an arithmetic fact that the claimant count has started to rise, and that adds to the Department of Social Security bills.

Sir Michael Spicer: What conclusions would my right hon. Friend draw if unemployment went up in the way that he suggests just as the new deal came into play?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Of course, the new deal is yet another burden on the social security budget. I shall come to that. All the Government's welfare reforms have cost money, and that one is no exception. Despite the promises by the Prime Minister and others before the election that all the extra expenditure on health and education would be paid for by social security reforms, those reforms have all cost money and have not saved it.

It is not just growth and unemployment that are already going wrong under the Government. Savings are a vital component in the economy if expenditure is not simply to be paid for by increased taxation. The Red Book that was published in March shows that the savings ratio is due to fall from its record level in 1997 when we lost office. It shows that it will fall in 1998 and that it will fall further in 1999 and further in 2000.

The Office for National Statistics recently published its arithmetic, which shows that the four-year fall in the savings ratio has been achieved in less than one year. That is not surprising. We warned the Government that, if savings were taxed, savings would fall. That is not a complicated matter: it is easy to understand. In their first Budget, the Government carried out a £5 billion raid on pension funds. When one adds to that the abolition of personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts, the two most successful savings vehicles of all time, it is hardly surprising that people save less. That was recorded in the Red Book. What we did not know at the time was that that four-year fall would be achieved in less than 12 months.

It is not just savings that are falling; investment is down as well. There was much hype about public sector investment in the Chancellor's statement, but, again, we have only to go back to the Red Book—which is, after all, only three months old—to find that, despite everything that the Government are trying to do, investment in the whole economy is due to fall again next year and to fall further the year after. Business investment has fallen from its peak in 1997, when we lost office, and is due to fall further this year, next year and the year after, so the Chancellor has locked into this three-year expenditure programme while knocking away the foundations on which that economic revenue depends, and it is irreversible.

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

The Chief Secretary told us about some marvellous new Cabinet Committee, which will get all this money back if Departments do not perform. If class sizes fail to fall, all the money will be clawed back from the Department for Education and Employment. If waiting lists go on rising, the Department of Health will be punished by having to return the money to the Treasury, so this is a recipe not for prudence, but for ruin. What we are faced with, and what the Government should worry about, is unemployment already going up, manufacturing output coming down, savings coming down, investment coming down and debt going up.

The Chief Secretary got into a most awful muddle about debt, but I think that he did finally admit that debt is going to rise. He was perhaps somewhat confused by the fact that, in the Red Book that was published at the time of the March Budget, projected debt was due to fall over the medium term—that was promised on page 121—but, a few months later, all that was thrown away and replaced by what one might call the Blue Book, which stated on page 43 that public sector net borrowing was due to go up every year. I think that we did finally get him to understand that, but that rise contrasts sharply with the record of the previous Government, who, at a similar time in the economic cycle, repaid massive quantities of debt.

I have not even mentioned the balance of payments. The Chancellor certainly did not mention it during his statement, but it is again a fact that the balance of payments is now going into alarming deficit. The Red Book did at least have the grace to note that the balance of payments was moving from a surplus of £4.5 billion last year—when we were in office—to a deficit of £6.5 billion next year, so that is another thing that is going wrong for the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary, just at the moment when they are making these irreversible commitments for up to three years hence.

Who will pay for all this? One group is public sector workers. Their pay is already lagging behind. Average earnings in the public sector in the year to April—again, I rely on the Office for National Statistics for these figures—rose by 2.8 per cent. In the private sector, they rose by 6.2 per cent.

Mr. Leslie: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again because I am going to come to his point. I know that he is very excitable, but, if he will just contain himself, I will come to the point about expenditure on the health service and social expenditure generally.

In the face of that distortion, the Government have announced that their so-called independent review bodies will now tie that same group of workers to a 2.5 per cent. inflation target. The Government are missing their target, but they want the public sector to be paid as though they had met their inflation target. In each Budget, and we have had two already, the Government will go on putting up duty on tobacco, drink, road fuel and heating fuel; all those will be increased way above inflation. Then up will go the cost of borrowing and of mortgages. Up will go council tax. All those will increase by far more than 2.5 per cent. The Government are putting up the prices, and it is public sector workers who are expected to accept wage increases of 2.5 per cent. That is a true reflection of how this Government value the public sector.

Mr. Darling: I am sure that public service workers will be very grateful that comrade Heathcoat-Amory is riding to their rescue. If I understand his argument correctly, he is saying that public service workers should be paid more and that the Conservatives welcome the spending on health and education, yet the whole thrust of his argument is that we are spending too much. Will he now tell us how much less he would spend and what he would cut?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That distortion in the economy is entirely of the Government's making. It was they who put up prices in their Budget. We had two Budgets in the space of eight months which increased indirect taxes way above inflation, and now they have the brass neck to say to public sector workers, "We missed our target and we want you to be paid at the rate of the inflation target that we missed."

Mr. Leslie *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am coming to the hon. Gentleman's private obsession, which is the public services, and health and education in particular.

We did find extra money for those priority services, particularly health and education, throughout our time in office, and we do welcome the fact that the Government are belatedly trying to keep their promises over class sizes and waiting lists, which they broke in their first year of office. They have a good deal of ground to make up because, last year, real expenditure fell below what our plans were: they inherited and kept to our cash totals, but higher inflation in the public services meant that real expenditure on health and education fell below what we had planned.

In addition, we know that the extra money that we are glad the Government are putting into the priority services will be soaked up by the damage and destruction that have already been caused in those services by, for example, the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering, the abolition of tax relief on private health insurance, the introduction of the minimum wage, and so on. Therefore, we know that the money that is going in will not all go towards patient care—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) should not be reading a book in the Chamber.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *rose—*

Mr. Darling: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I give way.

Mr. Darling: I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman's argument, even if Liberal Democrat Members are not. So far, the right hon. Gentleman has said that he welcomes our increased spending on health

and education. He wants more pay for the workers, so what is he going to cut if we are spending too much overall?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am coming to that next.

We did increase expenditure on priority areas, but in the context of an affordable and disciplined total. We did not draw cheques on the future three years hence and just hope that something would turn up. Our spending reviews—this answers the right hon. Gentleman—were genuine, finding money from one programme to spend on another.

That is what the Prime Minister himself promised. It was he who spotted that he was going to have difficulties if he won an election, so he said:

"as we get the welfare bills down . . . then we can release more money into education and health".

That could hardly have been clearer. Not only did he promise to get the welfare bills down, but he made it clear that the order of things was that that had to happen before he released more money into education and health.

Not only have the Government now got that the wrong way around—they are spending money on health and education before they have touched the reform of the welfare state—but the Prime Minister is wriggling off that promise about welfare reform. In Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday, the right hon. Gentleman started to temporise and to say that he did not mean to cut anything or do anything nasty like reducing anything; he just meant that he wanted to study everything and perhaps to increase spending—by a little, or possibly a lot. That is exactly what he is doing.

The splendid glossy document which I have here—the comprehensive spending review—and which was published on Tuesday gives us a glimpse of what is really happening to welfare and social security expenditure. One has to look hard for the figures and it is odd that by far the biggest item of public expenditure—nearly one third of the total—is relegated to near the back. Sandwiched between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the cross-departmental review of provision for young children—both titanic items of expenditure—we find out what will happen to nearly one third of public expenditure. Just as we suspected, it will go up and up. Once all the fiddles and changed statistics are added back in, it will increase by £37.5 billion.

That was not an easy calculation for the House of Commons Library to make, but it was done by adding back the tax credit that had been reclassified. If one adds back the 80 per cent. of working families tax credit, one arrives at an increase that is almost as great as the total extra that the Government plan to spend on health and education together—the extra was disguised as an accounting adjustment.

The Chancellor and the Government more generally make great play of their commitment to transparency. A few months ago, they published a ludicrous document entitled "Your Right to Know"; they talk endlessly about accountability and openness; and they said that all the figures were to be transparent and easy to understand. However, buried in the accounting adjustments we find working families tax credit and the true picture emerges if that is added back.

Mr. Mike Hall: To demonstrate the transparency of the right hon. Gentleman's policies to the House, will he say which part of the benefit bill he will cut?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The Prime Minister and his Ministers promised to reform the welfare state, but I have a suggestion for the hon. Gentleman: the Prime Minister should carry forward the reforms that we implemented. If the hon. Gentleman glances at the figures, he will see that, in the past three years, spending on social security increased in total—not year by year—by only 1.5 per cent. in real terms. That budget was virtually flat. If the Government are serious about welfare reform, why did they not take over the reforms and the spending profile that we bequeathed them? Because of the savings, which we were implementing and not merely talking about, we were able to spend on other priority areas, such as health and education.

The Government have failed on a central plank of their expenditure strategy. The true picture is of a colossal and continuing failure to reform the welfare state. As a result, the Government have embarked on a three-year commitment to spend money that they do not have and to pledge to the public services money that may never be earned.

The comprehensive spending review was billed as a Budget—it was that important. If so, it is the fourth that the Government have presented in a year. We have had the July Budget last year, a pre-Budget in November, the March Budget this year and now the spending review. Each time, the Government have increased their spending commitments and weakened the ability of the British economy to deliver the money on which those depend. Now they will have no chance of repaying national debt—they will not even balance the budget. They are going on a four-year spending spree with the public's money and, as usual, the public will end up paying.

5.54 pm

Mr. John Hutton (Barrow and Furness): I am grateful to have the opportunity to make what I hope will be a short contribution to the debate. I must first warmly welcome the conclusions of the comprehensive spending review, which sets out a sensible direction for the Government to take in meeting their objectives of promoting social cohesion, maintaining strong public finances, investing in modern and effective public services, and ensuring real value for money for the taxpayer by new disciplines over public spending, with proper efficiency targets and effective monitoring of public service outcomes.

The prudent decisions that we have taken on spending in the first two years, together with our actions to get public borrowing under control, have helped to lay the foundations for the new three-year spending plan announced on Tuesday by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. The Government's spending plans are based on cautious estimates for economic growth, which is right. It is good that the fundamental assumptions that underpin the comprehensive spending review have been verified by the National Audit Office, which will give them

[Mr. John Hutton]

considerably more weight than previous Government attempts to predict economic trends. Labour Members certainly came to treat with extreme caution the figures of the previous Government in all those areas.

I also have no doubt that the new spending plans fully reflect the priorities of the British public, who want our national health service to be put on to a secure, long-term growth trajectory, and our schools and colleges to be modernised and brought up to date with the best technology, teachers and facilities. The British public want a better deal for Britain's pensioners and improvements in our public transport infrastructure.

My constituents, in particular, want the Government to renew and redouble their efforts to deal with the problems of economic regeneration in those areas that have suffered through major job losses in traditional industries. We also want major improvements in our housing provision, in particular social housing, which was deliberately allowed to fall into decline by the previous Administration.

Those are the public's priorities, and, at long last, they are also the priority of the British Government. It is the measure of public support for those proposals that is the root cause of the Opposition's present difficulties. Their response to date can be described only as chaotic. They have three main arguments against the proposals in the comprehensive spending review. First, they allege that spending is too high and will propel us into a recession—that was the view of the shadow Chancellor on Tuesday. Yet, secondly, the Tories want to claim that they support the extra spending on the national health service and schools. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said clearly from the Dispatch Box, they cannot have it both ways. Their third line of argument is that the new spending plans are all a con. I understand that the shadow Health Secretary was yesterday trying to persuade lobby correspondents that the £21 billion of additional expenditure for the NHS amounted only to four shillings and nine pence, that we were fiddling the figures and that they could not rely on our estimates.

The Opposition cannot have their cake and eat it. If they are claiming that the figures are fiddled and that we are spending less, how can they be propelling us towards recession? To add insult to injury, the Conservatives are also claiming that their spending record was better than ours and that they spent more than we are proposing on all those key areas. Those arguments simply do not add up.

The Opposition could best be described as going through some sort of collective psychotic episode about the figures, which has been marked by hallucinations and delusions. They cannot separate fact from fiction. In truth, they are in a complete mess. They do not know whether to support the additional spending or oppose it.

If my arithmetic is correct, the shadow Chief Secretary was asked on three occasions tonight to say where he would cut the expenditure that we are proposing. He simply failed to answer the question. The Conservatives cannot agree among themselves whether we are spending too little or too much, and they are attempting to deny any personal responsibility for the dire state of many of our key public services, despite the fact that they formed the Government for 18 years.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hutton: No. This is a serious debate, so I have no intention of giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

The Conservative party's behaviour has been an unedifying display, providing further vivid confirmation—if any were needed—of the wisdom of the electorate's decision on 1 May last year to throw it out of office. I am sure that when the Conservatives begin their listening to Britain exercise, the public will spell out their support for the measures that the Government have announced. In that way, the Conservative party will be able to undergo the necessary therapy and counselling that it so obviously needs. Given its record in office, I cannot think of one good reason why we should listen to any of its criticisms of the comprehensive spending review.

On the detail of the review, I particularly welcome the additional spending on education, the national health service and the science base. The new money is an investment in our future as a modern, healthy and prosperous society, and I look forward with great anticipation to seeing how the new policies will bear fruit in my constituency.

The new commitments on further and higher education are also very good news, and I am glad that the cap on students entering higher education has been lifted. I particularly welcome the additional £200 million for further education. Further education colleges have a major role to play in helping to develop local economic regeneration initiatives—that has certainly been the experience in my constituency. I pay tribute to the excellent work of both Furness college and Barrow sixth-form college in helping people in my constituency to come to terms with the economic shock wave that hit us a few years ago. During that difficult period, both the colleges provided new opportunities and career options to hundreds of my constituents. They have done a fantastic job, and the new money should make the services that they provide even better.

On economic regeneration, the Government's new deal for communities initiative, under which a further £800 million will be invested in economic support to areas of high deprivation over the next three years, will be welcomed across the country, as will the proposals on the single regeneration budget. That is a hugely important area of Government responsibility, which will promote social cohesion and social inclusion—it goes right to the heart of what we should be doing in government.

My constituency suffered especially badly between 1990 and 1995 owing to the rundown in defence spending under the previous Government and the latter of the two Tory-inspired recessions. Over that period, 13,000 jobs were lost in the Furness area—in more stark terms, one in three of the work force in the area lost their jobs. Parts of my constituency remain unemployment black spots, particularly Barrow island, Hindpool and Central wards, where unemployment is almost twice the national average. That is totally unacceptable.

Barrow scores highly on the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions measurement of economic deprivation. The Department's figures reveal

serious social and economic problems, which we must begin to tackle effectively. In the 1998 DETR ranking of deprivation, Barrow and Furness came 55th out of 354 local authority areas; in 1991, it had been 94th. The 1998 figures show that Barrow is the most economically deprived part of Cumbria and that it is in the 15 per cent. of most deprived areas nationally.

I believe that the new spending priorities in the comprehensive spending review will allow us to make a new beginning. I fully understand the case for tying the new resources to innovative and well-focused initiatives, and I entirely agree with the proposals on money for modernisation. I believe that local agencies in my constituency will be able to participate actively in successful regeneration programmes—we have an established track record of doing so. Like many of my hon. Friends, I look forward to hearing details of the pilot scheme for the new deal for communities; I understand that we shall hear them from my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister next week.

My constituency is directly concerned with the defence procurement budget; everything that the Government spend on defence directly affects its economic well-being. I am absolutely delighted with the conclusions of the strategic defence review. In particular, I think that the decision to proceed with a replacement for the Invincible class of aircraft carriers—two new 40,000 tonne aircraft carriers will be built—is exactly right. It will allow Britain to continue to deploy forces around the world in support of the United Nations and our NATO allies or, if the need arises, independently. It will also allow the current amphibious capability of the Royal Navy to be fully effective; I remind the House that, in my constituency, we are building the replacement amphibious landing ships for the Royal Marines. When the carriers come into service, the Royal Navy will once again have a truly effective, modern and capable amphibious force.

I also strongly welcome the decision in the strategic defence review to proceed with the procurement of two new Astute class hunter killer submarines. I appreciate that difficult decisions have had to be made about the Royal Navy—I am thinking in particular of the decision to reduce the number of strategic submarines nuclear from 12 to 10. I understand why the Government found it necessary to make that decision, but it is hugely important that the reduction is not made at the expense of a new and capable class of submarines. We should by all means consider taking out of commission the older SSNs, but the Government would have made a serious mistake if they had decided not to proceed with the procurement of the two new submarines.

Taken together with the existing order book, the decision to build the new carriers and submarines means that my constituents who work for GEC Marine at Barrow can look forward to 15 years of job security and stability. That is in stark contrast to what happened under the Conservative Government, when two thirds of the work force at GEC Marine lost their jobs, because the Government had no long-term commitment to the future of shipbuilding and had a completely ineffective strategy on procurement decisions. Many of the key procurement decisions that my constituents were waiting on were delayed and delayed, but I am now absolutely confident that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence will take the decisions on time and in a competitive context, so that my constituents can look forward to the solid future that they were denied by the Conservative party.

I believe that the comprehensive spending review will provide the Government with a solid platform on which we can build a modern, fair and decent society. It has my very strong support.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next hon. Member to speak, I remind the House that Madam Speaker has set a 15-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches. Of course, hon. Members do not need to take the full 15 minutes.

6.6 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I welcome the Chancellor's Tuesday statement, particularly the extra funds for the national health service and for education. I do not think that the Chief Secretary was expecting me to say that, but I said it on Tuesday and I am very glad again to put it on the record. I also said on Tuesday that I knew that the Chancellor would eventually find the war chest if only he had the will to look for it.

I believe that the Chancellor is right to leave a current budget surplus over the next few years until the outlook for economic growth is clearer, and I accept the Government's case for adopting a more cautious forecast. However, there are many uncertainties and some real clouds on the horizon, as today's chambers of commerce report confirms. The Government must take seriously the threat to British competitiveness and the possibility that investment will leave the country because of the strength of the pound. I hope that the Chancellor will avoid the boom-bust approach to financing public services, which is bad for our schools, hospitals and economic stability.

I suspect that the Chief Secretary would not expect me to concentrate on areas of agreement; constructive opposition requires me to focus on some of the statement's deficiencies and on what I believe the Government could and should do. The Government's use of cumulative cash figures and their blind eye to the effects of inflation must delude no one about what is really going on.

Overall, current Government spending will rise only 1.4 per cent. in this Parliament. That is half the 2.7 per cent. rise under the Tories in the previous Parliament, so it is no bonanza, and I have no idea what the Tories are talking about when they accuse the Government of profligacy for proposing half the increase that they delivered—which did not exactly secure re-election.

The fact that no extra money was announced for 1998–99 tends to be overlooked in the euphoria. It is no foregone conclusion that progress will be rapid on class sizes and hospital waiting lists this year. There is certainly no jam today, and perhaps not even tomorrow. The supertanker may prove extremely slow to turn round.

In the light of the extra money allocated, it is surprising that the Government have not been able to promise more solid service improvements. We are told that the extra £40 billion for health and education will allow the early pledges to be delivered. Well, I hope so, but I seem to remember that that was supposed to cost a mere £100 million for each service. We do not seem to be getting very much for our money.

[Mr. Malcolm Bruce]

The Liberal Democrats would like a cut in class sizes for eight to 11-year-olds, in which age range 40 per cent. of children are in classes of 31 or more; a target of reducing maximum average primary school class sizes to 25 or fewer; early-years education for all three-year-olds whose parents want it—I acknowledge that the Government have made some commitments on that; a cap on hospital waiting times of six months; and the abolition of all eye and dental check charges. I am sorry that more of those substantive policies did not find their way into the Chancellor's statement or emerge from the Departments.

The Government publication, "Modern Public Services for Britain", promised

"4.7% a year, above inflation, for three years"

for the NHS, and

"an increase of 5 per cent. a year on average above inflation between 1998/99 and 2001/2002".

for education.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I assume that the hon. Gentleman's wish list represented new Liberal Democrat spending commitments. Will he be kind enough to tell us what those would cost and what the overall spending target would be if his party ever got anywhere near power?

Mr. Bruce: Yes, I will, as I always do, when we produce our alternative Budget and our annual statement. Indeed, we published a statement on spending a few weeks ago, but it has clearly not yet reached Conservative central office.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that Labour's promises held good, whatever the economic circumstances, and even if inflation went up. That is misleading, because the Government have promised cash figures based on their 2.5 per cent. inflation forecast, which may be overshot, as it has been for the past two years. An overshoot of only 1 per cent. would wipe out £5 billion of health and education spending over the three years.

Many economists, including those who advise the Government, think that inflation will overshoot. In the economic and fiscal strategy report, the Treasury promised that extra cash would be available to compensate for inflation,

"if inflation varies substantially from forecast"—

what "substantially" means is unclear—but yesterday, in the Treasury Select Committee, the Chancellor told me that there would be no more cash, no matter how much inflation went up. With respect, that means that the Government's pledge is so much pie in the sky. It also means a potential for more black holes to open up in the Government's spending promises.

As the Government's nominal revenues are boosted from higher inflation, and given the sorry state of education and health funding, which we are now trying to remedy, I believe that the Chancellor should protect those two areas from the consequences of higher inflation during this Parliament.

Mr. Leslie: On the subject of black holes opening up in finances, the hon. Gentleman will remember that the Liberal spokesperson on tax, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), said that their party would increase the personal allowance for income tax to equalise it with capital gains tax, which the Library has costed at £17.5 billion, equivalent to 8p on income tax. How would he pay for all his promises?

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is new to the House and he is a bit repetitive. I knew that it was a mistake to give way to him. My party produced a costed manifesto, acknowledged by independent people as the most honest and objective account of party intentions from any party, and his party did no such thing. We will do what we always do and produce an annual alternative Budget and a clear, costed programme.

The Government have only small reserves to accommodate any need for more cash: a mere £1.5 billion for departmental budgets next year, out of a spending total of £175 billion. I only hope that we do not have another BSE crisis, never mind an overshoot on inflation. I am registering a genuine, serious concern about the Government's ability to deliver, and I hope that they will think again.

This has been an incredibly secretive, centralised and non-consultative process. On Tuesday, the Chancellor announced the allocation of £1 trillion of public money, without so much as a sniff of consultation with the House, the public, or even the Labour party. Indeed, as far as I can tell, half the Cabinet were not consulted.

The outcome was presented in reverse. We were not told what the costed policies were; we were told how much will be allocated, and the policies will come later. Apparently, what the people think has already been quietly digested in secret. We believe that the performance contracts, which are in principle a good and interesting development, should be with Parliament, not with the Treasury, and that there should be much more public consultation on spending priorities and departmental targets. It is our money and we, the public, have a right to some say in what the priorities should be.

The Government seem to be taking a very restrictive attitude to public sector pay, but that is not the current inflationary threat, as pay rises in the public sector are at 2.5 per cent., below inflation, whereas private sector rises are at more than 6 per cent., yet the Government say that pay review bodies must take into account the need for efficiency savings; the need to hit the Government's 2.5 per cent. inflation target; and affordability against budgets. Public sector workers appear to be being used as the Government's shield against fears that there is too much loosening of policy.

The practical concern is that good education, for example, depends at least as much on attracting and retaining good teachers as on replacing dilapidated buildings. We accept that the Government must be responsible about pay, but responsibility also implies that we must encourage some of our best people into the public services and not end up, as I fear we will, in a vicious circle of lower pay and lower than desirable standards.

Let us consider some of the Government's specific boasts. The Secretary of State for Health was certainly being boastful on the radio this morning. The increase in spending on health of about 4.75 per cent. over the next three years will take the average real rise over this

Parliament to about 3.7 per cent. a year, assuming that the Government stay within their inflation target. That compares with 4.1 per cent. in the previous Prime Minister's first five years; 3.3 per cent. over his entire premiership; and 3.1 per cent. on average over the 18 years of Tory government. It is healthy growth, but it is not unprecedented, as is being claimed. Indeed, in the three years from 1989–90 to 1992–93 average health spending rose by 5.5 per cent. per annum, yet waiting lists rose during that period, although the number of people waiting for more than a year fell. Therefore, the Secretary of State for Health is misleading us when he says in his press release that this is

"the biggest cash injection in the history of the National Health Service."

In the only meaningful terms—real money—the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) did better seven or so years ago.

The budget on education will rise by 3 per cent. a year in real terms over the Parliament, with 5 per cent. rises over the next three years. During the last Prime Minister's first five years, the rise was 2.6 per cent. a year on average or 1 per cent. over the entire period in office. Therefore, this rise is much better, but it is certainly not a bonanza.

Yet again, the Government are paying the price of two years of going backwards on standards. I remind the Chief Secretary what the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said on 11 April 1994 when he was in opposition:

"It is a scandal that over a million of our children in primary schools are taught in classes of over 30."

Since then, the percentage in such classes has risen from 28 to 34.8 per cent., and to 40 per cent. in the eight to 11 age group. If inflation rises by more than the Government forecast, these real rises, impressive as they look initially, will soon melt away.

Mr. Darling: I wonder what the leader of the Liberal party meant when he said in the debate on the Queen's Speech:

"If we tighten our belts now, we have a real opportunity to get to grips with the huge hangover of debt left behind by the Conservatives."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 74.]

That seems to be a rather different story from the one advanced by the hon. Gentleman today.

Mr. Bruce: Absolutely not. What my right hon. Friend said then and what we said in our manifesto was that we had to start investment in health and education on day one of this Parliament. That is what we 46 Liberal Democrats have been elected to fight for, and that is what we are doing. Of course, we are in favour of ensuring value for money and agree that it is necessary to finance, not borrow, the extra expenditure. That is why we committed ourselves to putting an extra 1p on income tax, which the other parties were not prepared to do.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Chief Secretary and I all have an interest in what happens in Scotland. According to the Government's own figures, the Scottish departmental budget will be 1.5 per cent. lower in real terms in 2001 and 2002 than it was in 1994–95 when Ian Lang was Secretary of State for Scotland. He was not conspicuously popular. Over the entire Parliament, the real budget for the Scottish block will grow at an anaemic 0.6 per cent. a year in real terms. That is a fraction of the 4.7 per cent. annual real growth rate in the first five years of the last Prime Minister or even the 2.9 per cent. real rate through his entire period in office. That is no bonanza for Scotland.

Can the Chief Secretary confirm that the health budget in Scotland will rise by only 2.8 per cent. in real terms this Parliament, compared with an average 3.1 per cent. during the 18 years under the Tories? As I said in the House on Tuesday, that is not John Major plus, but John Major minus.

On other occasions, I have raised issues relating to my constituency. I live in an area of strong population growth where, for example, we need a new secondary school—a new Garioch academy—and new primary schools in growth points such as Kintore. I hope that the Government's injection of funds will allow those projects to come to fruition. So far, we have made only limited progress. In the small town of Ellon, the health board promised more consultant clinics in the town, but it has not been able to find the resources to deliver that, let alone resources for the community hospital that the majority of people in the town think is necessary.

It is on such specific performances that the Government will be measured, not on the billions of pounds or on comparisons of who invested more and who less. It is on what will translate into real, measurable terms. Naturally, we welcome the public sector boost that was announced on Tuesday. However, we are entitled to say that there is a big difference between attractive headlines about big numbers and the real palpable transformation of Britain's public services. We will not be impressed by the former until the Government make real progress on delivering the latter, and I am sure that the British people will give the same verdict.

6.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Before I come to the substance of my remarks, I cannot help but comment on the speech of the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce). Given that the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties have been screaming for months about when the review was to come, if they had something of substance to say in the context of the review, it would have been helpful if they had submitted it to the Treasury.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: We did.

Mr. Miller: If so, what is the complaint about? How can the hon. Gentleman say that he had no opportunity to comment? Obviously, he has commented, but now whinges because he has not got exactly his way. It is hardly surprising that we did not follow the Liberal Democrat party's advice, as the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) made clear.

It is clear from Conservative Members' comments that there is a fundamental lack of understanding about prudent investment in the public sector. It is clear from constituencies such as mine how a lack of prudent investment in the public sector has led to social exclusion, which in turn has increased costs to the public purse. That was clear throughout the term of the previous Administration.

There was an investment programme in housing estates constructed in the pre-cast reinforced concrete—PRC—style which was designed to modernise them and bring

[Mr. Miller]

them up to a decent standard, but the Conservative Government stopped it. As a result, some houses run the risk of having to be demolished. That was a crazy, short-sighted approach to public expenditure. Since my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister released some capital receipts as part of his commitment to public sector housing, that programme is back on track. As a result of the programme, we have citizens living in decent homes and the housing stock will have a longer life expectancy. That is prudent use of public money.

I do not entirely blame the previous Administration for the decline in employment because some job losses were technology driven. In my constituency, massive numbers of people who previously worked in the vehicle and petro-chemical industries found themselves unemployed and, under the Conservative Government, unemployable. No attempts were made, except for the occasional Mickey Mouse scheme, to get people back into real, permanent jobs. As a result of this Government's initiatives, starting with the new deal and including the many steps to integrate programmes across departmental boundaries, people are getting back into real jobs. That is prudent use of public money.

I am thinking, in particular, about a discussion I had with THI, which is developing a large leisure complex in my constituency adjacent to one of the poorest communities. The developer is already prepared to work with public sector partners—training and enterprise councils, schools, further education and the Employment Service—to ensure that the jobs that emerge from its investment will benefit people from the poorest part of the community. It is responding positively because it is clearly to its advantage to have people trained locally to meet its needs. It is responding to an initiative by this Government which, again, reflects prudent investment.

I intervened earlier to touch on my lack of confidence in the Conservative party's description of what is happening to the real economy. The investment that I have just spoken of will create 900 jobs next year, and enormous strides have been made in partnership with the local authority and the Department of Trade and Industry to create many other jobs in the area.

I am particularly encouraged by a photograph on the front page of my local paper, which bears a remarkable similarity to that rotten and misleading Tory party poster of 1979, "Labour isn't working". That was the lie then and that is the lie now. The photograph shows people willingly queueing up to apply for jobs available at Vauxhall Motors in my constituency—jobs that have come to Britain as a result of the Government's prudent public investment.

Had the Conservative party's analysis of what is happening to the economy been accurate, those jobs would have gone to Russelsheim in Germany, to Belgium or to Spain. That did not happen. They came to the United Kingdom as a result of the Government presenting the best case in partnership with the company, the local authority and many other private sector players. Again, that is prudent use of public money.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Tell that to Dunstable.

Mr. Miller: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, as a result of the Government's initiative, the plant at Luton has been saved. Under the Conservative Administration, the Dunstable van plant closed. The hon. Gentleman should get his facts right.

I come now to the substance of my remarks and, in particular, the aspect of the comprehensive spending review that gives me a great deal of pleasure—the reference on pages 77 and 78 to investment in and promotion of science and innovation.

Under the previous Administration, since about the mid-1980s, there has been a gradual and systematic decline in investment in research and development in Britain. There is no doubt about that. The House discussed that earlier this week when debating a report from the Select Committee on Science and Technology. The Chairman of that Committee, the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark), set out the case succinctly.

As a result of the comprehensive spending review, there is a massive commitment to British science, something for which the Labour party has been pressing for many years. We are delighted with that investment because we believe that it will be the seedcorn for future investment in Britain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) referred in an intervention to the Daresbury laboratory in his constituency just down the road from me. I was delighted to see £100 million being committed to synchrotron radiation in the comprehensive spending review. My hon. Friend has pressed for that investment since 1993. It did not happen under the Conservatives, but as a result of the comprehensive spending review, subject to the business case, and as we are talking about prudent investment, we shall now see that investment.

The case for that investment is solid. This is the laboratory that helped Dr. John Walker to win the Nobel prize for molecular biology last year. He worked from Cambridge, but he used the X-ray facilities of the Daresbury laboratory. That is the business case for the laboratory, and I hope that when the Department of Trade and Industry and the science councils consider that programme, the project will promote science in the north-west of England. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary will pass those comments on to his right hon. and hon. Friends in the DTI.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Before the hon. Gentleman goes overboard with euphoria about the injection of money into university research, will he accept that, until we see the small print, we shall not know what matching funding will be required and, therefore, what distortion may also occur in research into the humanities?

Mr. Miller: I was not referring to university research; I was referring specifically to the Daresbury project. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman understands that that project creates a three-way partnership between the research councils, the universities and the private sector, producing not only an expansion of knowledge in pure science for Britain, but massive results that are transforming themselves into innovation—just the sort of thing that the Government are seeking to promote. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will support my comments in that respect.

All those developments—the local ones relating to investment in housing and jobs, the crossing of boundaries bringing together social services and health and new deal

partners in the poorest parts of my community, what is happening in the manufacturing sector in my constituency and the seemingly esoteric research which is, in reality, the practical way of rebuilding Britain—are examples of the prudent use of public money. I am delighted to see commitments towards the continuation of such programmes in the comprehensive spending review. I am sure that in my constituency and in the north-west of England, we shall see substantial benefits as a result of that review.

6.36 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): The Chancellor of the Exchequer and his Treasury team, including the Chief Secretary, are proving increasingly incompetent in discharging their main role, which is to provide a stable economic background against which the country can achieve a reasonable level of growth without excessive threat from inflation or other shocks. We should always judge the economic statements made by a Government to the House by the likely impact in the medium term on the ability of business men to manage the growth of their businesses, and the effect that they will have on job creation, job security and living standards in the country.

That point is always emphasised in most of the speeches by Treasury Ministers, but I become ever more doubtful about whether they will achieve it. Ministers who frequently use the word "prudence" in every speech that they make are proving ever more imprudent in practice. They talk about a stable, medium-term view of economic policy, but now we have the fourth set of figures—the fourth policy announcement—presented as if it were a Queen's Speech, with the most surprising lurch of policy and tone that we have seen so far.

The iron Chancellor has gradually moved nearer to being an open-handed man, but the transformation to Santa Claus shows that there has been a dramatic change of direction, and that is what we criticise. It is imprudent, it will be regretted before the end of the Parliament and it is time that the House addressed it, as Conservative Members are, from a serious standpoint, rather than joining in the inevitable celebrations that take place on the Government Back Benches when largesse is being handed out to every lobby in sight.

Let me make clear precisely my position about some of the welcome increases in spending. There has never been a Chancellor or Chief Secretary who did not come here with some announcements that increased spending. It is the totality of public spending that we are criticising. There has not been an adequate choice of priorities. To commit to an excessive total over three years enables all the numbers to sound like telephone numbers, but it is reckless to do so regardless of what economic circumstances may bring.

Labour Members have asked for our position. Let me deal first with the priorities. The Chief Secretary should have used the comprehensive spending review to make hard choices on the priorities about which the Prime Minister talks. The Government's first priorities are health and education. Not surprisingly, I welcome that; they have been the first priorities of Governments for as long as I can remember—they were for the previous Government. Increased spending on the national health service is welcome, and I trust that it will be delivered over the next three years. I also welcome increased spending on education, including higher and further education, and I and my right hon. and hon. Friends trust that that, too, will be delivered.

I listened carefully to exchanges earlier between the Secretary of State for Health and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). She did not demand that less be spent on health, but she put the spending increase into proportion. As the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) has rightly said, the figures were grossly exaggerated by the way in which they were presented. They are, in fact, fairly normal. The Secretary of State was wrong to claim that his increase was unprecedented, unless he was simply claiming that there had never before been a three-year increase. The growth in real terms that he announced is lower than the level during my last year as Secretary of State for Health, and lower than in the following year, when my successor, William Waldegrave, was Secretary of State. There have been previous increases just as large, as there should be when health is the priority.

Nor are the education figures exceptional. The Government have just about managed to deliver their election promise—I congratulate them on that—of increasing the proportion of gross domestic product spent on education. However, they have done so by a tiny fraction. I do not go along with the hon. Member for Gordon when he takes over from the left of the Labour party by demanding more big spending, but he was right to say that by the end of the Parliament, education will creep just above the proportion of GDP spent by the previous Government. The Government have just about delivered that pledge.

No one on the Conservative Benches—unless some particularly hard-line colleague is yet to speak—is going to demand that we spend less on the NHS or education. However, the rest of the Government's spending makes the review difficult to contemplate. We, too, gave priority to education and health, and our record bears comparison with the Government's new figures. However, we examined other priorities, and we restrained the growth of other Departments so that it was affordable. That has not been done in the comprehensive spending review.

It is easy for Government Back Benchers to welcome every increase. Most propositions advanced by spending Departments are desirable. The duty of the Treasury team—particularly the Chief Secretary—is to decide which of them we can afford this year, which to postpone and where more efficiency savings can be sought. That is what happens in an annual spending review, particularly in a fundamental review. The comprehensive review is not a new idea; when Michael Portillo was Chief Secretary, he and I produced big increases for health and education from a comprehensive review, but we also produced what turned out to be the beginning of control of public expenditure. That produced a steady decline in excessive borrowing during the last years of the previous Parliament. The control established then is now being thrown away.

Scarcely a Department of State has failed to get a pretty good settlement. Only the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food appears to have done badly, and that is mostly because of the ending of compensation payments for BSE. Total expenditure over the next three years is due to rise by 2.75 per cent. in real terms above the rate of inflation. That is a tremendous loosening of public spending, and it bears no relation to what the

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Chancellor and the Chief Secretary said when they launched the CSR. It certainly does not resemble all the prudence that we were told about before the election, when we heard that new Labour would abandon the old high-spending approach and would no longer throw money at every problem. The rejoicing on the Labour Benches is because new Labour is doing exactly that.

It is almost impossible for the Chief Secretary to defend the 2.75 per cent. figure. Only three months ago, while he was in the middle of his comprehensive spending review, the Red Book revealed that the Government planned a much lower growth in public spending than they have been able to deliver. The increases are not some great economic breakthrough, but a total relaxation of what was intended to be controlled public spending.

The Government clearly know that that is so. They are trying to present their review in such a way as to minimise the impact on the outside world of their spending. The documents that we have received have reduced the amount of information available to the House about future spending. The Government have taken over our well-advanced move to resource accounting, and have taken the opportunity to change many definitions and seek to obfuscate what is happening.

The biggest increases are in accounting adjustments. No Labour Back Bencher has yet leapt to his feet to praise the massive increase in accounting adjustments, but I do not doubt that we shall hear from one sooner or later. The reason for that is the working families tax credit, which has quite wrongly been tucked away in the accounting adjustments. That is an attempt to reduce the otherwise appalling impact of a huge increase in the welfare budget. I was extremely critical of the working families tax credit during the Budget as I believe it to be inferior to the family credit that it replaced, and which used always to count as social security. It will prove a nightmare to apply working families tax credit. In America, it has proved extremely expensive, and it is easy for people to obtain it fraudulently. When the Government first announced the credit to the House, they had not done their sums properly. Now they have discovered the real costs, and they have tucked the credit away into the books, just as they have with other matters.

I welcome private finance, having helped to develop the private finance initiative during our last three or four years in office. I am increasingly suspicious about the Government's approach to the PFI, however, as they are going in for off-the-books accounting. Risk transfer is not being given the importance that it was given previously. How can the Chief Secretary justify not including the guarantee for the channel tunnel link as public expenditure? We are talking about £3.75 billion. No previous Government have regarded a guarantee for a debt—a taxpayers' guarantee—as not counting as a liability in public expenditure.

There is also talk of finding more areas in which receipts can be netted off against expenditure, which means not counting taxation as taxation, but using it to reduce the apparent costs of providing public services. Assumptions are being made about fraud, and about asset sales, which I do not think will be realised. The books have been altered to try to reduce the impact, and to bring the increase down to 2.75 per cent. in real terms over three years.

I was impressed by an article by David Smith in *The Sunday Times* on 12 July about the effect of changing definitions for apparently purposeless reasons when presenting spending. He gave more detail than I have time for, but the most important point is that the Government have given up what we used to call the control total, our principal instrument for controlling public expenditure. We left out cyclical social security expenditure because we could not control it, but we bore down on the rest of expenditure, which was within the control of Departments.

Of course the Government have abolished the control total. In this year alone, it is going up by 1.2 per cent. in real terms. Over the next three years, the control total, which we used as our principal instrument for controlling public expenditure, is set to rise by 3.4 per cent. each year over and above inflation—in other words, in real terms. That is a relaxation of total public spending at an extraordinary time.

Why are we concerned? Most politicians are happier when they are spending money, our constituents are happier when we are spending money, and it has never been part of my approach to life to wear a hair shirt too readily. However, as I said, I am concerned about job security, living standards and the state of British business and commerce, which ought to be our principal concern. They will be the Government's concern before long, because the position is deteriorating. The Government have taken the extraordinary decision to abandon their control over public spending when everybody knows that the economy is slowing down fast and when there is increasing sign of pain.

Mr. Miller *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Clarke: I am glad that things are fine in Ellesmere Port, but one does not have to go far from Ellesmere Port to find engineering and manufacturing firms that are having a hard time.

Mr. Miller: He is talking down Britain.

Mr. Clarke: I am not talking down Britain. I want Britain to be a successful enterprise economy, but it will not be if it is run incompetently by the Treasury team.

Our constituents will understand why we ask where the money is coming from. That is a sensible question, which has been asked of Governments in the past and which we have asked when we have been in opposition. What do we get by way of an answer? The answer now is the same as Harold Wilson used to give—it is all going to come from economic growth—but it comes when people are more worried about economic growth than they have been at any time since the Labour Government took office, and they are right to be worried. The Government are anticipating a not terribly spectacular level of growth, and I agree with all my right hon. and hon. Friends who have spoken so far in believing that the Government are counting their chickens before they are hatched. That is an extremely reckless thing to do in economic policy.

I am by no means sure that the Government's forecasts will be achieved. I have no time to go into my usual arguments about why I think monetary policy is slowing down growth too fast. I agree with Dr. DeAnne Julius that, at the very least, policy should now be going into

neutral. I think that the economy will slow down more than the Bank suggests and more than the Government suggest. Once the impact of the Asian crisis has arrived, it will slow down extremely rapidly. The result will be that the Government cannot pay for what they are promising today unless they tax more and borrow more. It is no good talking about the golden rule—borrowing, which is planned to rise now, will go up to a level that will cause the Government great political difficulties.

6.51 pm

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): I am extremely pleased to follow my neighbour, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). I join him in recognising and praising the importance of a Government who are going to deliver on their election promises. The right hon. and learned Gentleman might not be sitting on the Opposition Back Benches now if he had been a member of a Government who could persuade people that they meant what they said and delivered what they promised. The comprehensive spending review and the document "Modern Public Services for Britain—Investing in Reform" give the Labour party an opportunity to forge a new contract with the people—a Government who deliver on their promises.

I start by praising my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary for one promise that has had no publicity at all: in opposition, we made the promise that we would stop the large-scale sale of Forestry Commission woodland. Under the Conservative Government, a third of a million acres of woodland was sold; that environment declined, and public access opportunities were lost all over the country. When we came to power, we imposed a moratorium, and the Government have now made it clear that large-scale sales of Forestry Commission land will cease. That will enhance the environment and improve the landscape.

That decision has been generally welcomed, but the review goes further. I am pleased that a middle way has been found for the Forestry Commission. The lodges where people stay on holiday are to be refurbished and brought up to modern standards by using private sector finance. We are enhancing the environment and giving people more and better recreation and leisure facilities.

Much of the debate on the spending review has concentrated on the extra spending—the inputs on education, health, crime and disorder measures and transport. The shadow Financial Secretary acknowledged that this was the biggest spending bonanza since the war, but he did not seem clear about where he stood; he was not sure whether he was for it or against it. I liked the tack he took—talk about the cavalry charging down the hill to protect and enhance the pay of public sector workers. Cleaners and dustbin men will remember the 18 years under the Tories, and will never see them as saviours.

Unlike my colleagues, I want to focus on the processes in the comprehensive spending review, because it is apparent that it contains several measures that are good public and economic policies. When the glitz and presentation has been cut away, what is left is a spending plan over three years that brings consistent and steady growth to public services, especially education and the health service, of about 4 per cent. a year in real terms.

That does not sound like a lot, but head teachers, hospital managers and people who work in the public services acknowledge that there is light at the end of the tunnel. What they cannot live with is uncertainty, so having a planning framework of steady, cumulative growth over three years is important to them. Of even greater importance would be to try to ensure that the three-year spending plans were constantly rolled forward, so that there is always a third indicative year. People would then have the opportunity to plan to take on new staff, to take decisions about capital expenditure, and to engage in long-term planning, rather than 12-month planning.

I also welcome the set of cross-departmental reviews, on the under-fives, asylum and immigration, crime prevention and the justice system. Those are important, because they show that the Government engage in joined-up thinking and joined-up government. We shall do more of that, and continue to pull Departments together, so that, in crude terms, by adding value to each Department, we get better bangs for our buck.

I am delighted that the comprehensive spending review speaks of a regeneration budget, new deals for communities and a revamp of the single regeneration budget that will bring extra resources to our most deprived areas. I say to the Minister: look closely at coalfield communities and at the coalfields task force, which has made 80 recommendations for Departments across Government. Let us use that as a vehicle to bring real change, new investment, new jobs and a new future to coalfield communities.

As well as inputs and extra spending, outputs and outcomes are important. I look forward to seeing the detail of the spending agreements and to there being some, shall we say, creative tension among the centre, the Treasury, and the spending Departments. I hope that we will look to spending Departments to make savings, and give them the opportunity to keep some of those savings, because the language of government is the language of priorities. We need to acknowledge that not all public spending is good public spending; we need to ensure that public spending is modern, and goes to the areas of most need.

That is why I am keen that we set targets not only for Departments, but for public spending all the way down the scale. I hope that we shall have local contracts between divisional police commanders and their communities, and between head teachers and the community that uses the school, so that people know who is accountable for the services. Targets and timetables should be set, and questions should be asked if they are not delivered.

The citizens charter made a good start on that, but the measures were not very sophisticated. They included the number of rings of a telephone and how quickly a report could be produced. We should get out and talk to people about the public services they demand and aspire to—and, what is more, pay for. We have an obligation and a responsibility to provide better services than people are receiving at the moment.

I hope that we shall ask hard questions, for example, of police authorities. How many of us, in the Chamber or outside, can name the members of the police authority that shapes our community? Very few of us can do so. We must identify stakeholders and the providers of public services, and set them hard targets.

We must also examine mistakes. I have mentioned the police. A great deal needs to be done to make our police force modern. I am ashamed at the amount of sickness in

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many police forces in this country. It cannot be right that, on any one working day, 1,500 police officers in the Metropolitan police are on sick leave. It cannot be right that there is so much early retirement, not only in the police but in the education service. We need to examine that problem, and manage it much more forcefully than we have done in the past.

I sometimes think that public servants are good at managing problems. The issue is our lack of social and public service entrepreneurs—charismatic figures who can find solutions. We must strive to identify the people and organisations that can implement good practice. We need to praise good public services and contrast them with the worst. The problem in recent years is that we have picked on the worst services—we have named and shamed—but we all respond better to praise and reward. I want us to examine public services, reward and support the best, and make them beacons for change. Public services in this country would then be transformed.

That leads to implications for the inspectorate—the people who monitor our public services, such as the Audit Commission and the Office for Standards in Education. I have great praise for the Audit Commission, and it does not need to hire a lobbyist to find that out. It is very good at identifying problems, putting forward solutions and suggesting outputs, but it is not good at delivering outcomes. We must set up organisations that support people, love public servants and give people who can achieve the opportunities to do so, such as seminars, extra training and extra resources for their organisation. By praising the best, we can enhance the rest.

Ofsted has a great deal to achieve. I note that one of the documents accompanying the comprehensive spending review sets out aims and objectives that Ofsted has set itself, including the objective of getting Investors in People status. I hope that it can move from a negative, Lone Ranger, destructive approach to school inspection towards one that considers and enhances the good aspects and acts as an agent for change.

I believe that public services are important, and the public agree, but they must be persuaded that those services are theirs, that they meet their needs and that they are stakeholders in the services. I praise the comprehensive spending review, because it is investment for reform and an opportunity to achieve modern public services. It is a challenge for change. I hope that we shall meet that challenge and make that change.

7.4 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): Before I come to my main theme, I want to address an issue of great interest to me as a former Chief Secretary. It is dealt with in section 4 of the comprehensive spending review, which is all about efficiency and modern public services. The Chancellor spent a good deal of time talking about that in the early part of his statement on Tuesday. The document says that new public service agreements for Departments

" will include their new objectives and measurable efficiency and effectiveness targets."

I had a great sense of deja vu when I heard the Chancellor's speech and read the document, because when I was Chief Secretary we had documents saying exactly the same things—we were measuring not by inputs but by outputs. We were having annual reports and checks.

Throughout our period of government, we took huge strides forward in efficiency measures and cost savings in the civil service and the delivery of services. There is absolutely nothing new about that, although the document tries to claim that there is. It is a huge travesty in its treatment of the 18 years of our Government. There was substantial capital investment, not least—indeed, particularly—in transport.

The Chancellor referred on Tuesday to

"an education system that advanced only the ambitions of the few".—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 190.]

He gave the impression that that is what we had done. Our period in government was one in which the numbers of people going into higher education were greater than ever before and there was a huge extension in the opportunities for higher education. When we took office, one in eight people went into higher education; when we left office, the figure was one in three.

The health and education measurements that are so heavily emphasised in the document are precisely those that our Government introduced, which were frequently criticised by the Labour Opposition. Labour now relies very heavily on the reforms that we put in place. I do not object to those reforms—they are good Tory measures, so I welcome them. However, the Government should not suggest that they are new, or that they will revolutionise public expenditure pro[illegible].

That brings me to [illegible]oint about public service agreements. I want to understand their significance, and I hope that the Financial Secretary will deal with this point in great detail when she replies. The emphasis is on measurable objectives. I do not know what the new public service agreements will be. I certainly hope that they will not use the objectives set out in this document—very often in the light blue passages at the beginning—because most of them are too unclear to measure, and many are pious hopes. They are certainly not quantified. I hope that the objectives will be quantified.

That brings us to the key question: what will the Government do if the targets are missed? We are told that the services will be regularly monitored, not annually but much more often. Are the Government saying that they will not give more money over the three-year programme to various Departments if they miss a particular target—we understand that the targets will be not only quantified but timetabled—and if so, do they really believe that that is realistic?

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) pointed out in an intervention following a question that I asked, if the health service targets for waiting lists are not met, will that mean that the money for the health service will be reduced? If class sizes are not met, does that mean that the education budget will be reduced? That is not realistic, so I wonder what the reform amounts to.

There is a likelihood of increased expenditure in other parts of the Government's programme and of unexpected further expenditure requirements, so, if the Government are relying on such an approach to make compensating savings when Departments do not meet their targets, all I can say is that I do not believe they will deliver their pledges.

The early auguries are not good. One of the delivery measurements listed is

"requiring outstanding reviews to deliver against tight timetables".

A number of reviews have missed tight timetables by a mile, so there has not been a good start. On efficiency, I notice that one of the biggest increases—in cash terms—in all the programmes is the social security running costs administration programme. That is not a sign of tight control, either. I want to know how it will work, and whether it will lead to major reform.

I come now to my main theme. Like other Conservative Members, I believe that the Chancellor has thrown caution to the winds, and is taking a huge gamble. His departure from caution is the increase in average annual spending to 2.75 per cent. in real terms. However, I believe that it is more than that. If one takes into account the private finance initiative and accounting changes to which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe referred, the figure is more than 3 per cent. in real terms, measured like for like with the past. That figure is way beyond the Chancellor's earlier prudent statements.

The gamble is that economic growth in the next three years will be able to sustain that figure, which is above the long-term growth rate of the economy, and is unlikely, in the view of most in the worlds of industry and commerce, to be achieved in the next year or two. Like my right hon. and learned Friend, I always get suspicious when the word "prudence" appears so often in a statement—I think that it was used 14 times in the Chancellor's statement in June. I become even more suspicious when he starts to drop the word and it appears only rarely. That is the gamble, and I shall concentrate tonight on what I see as the traps facing the Treasury in this area.

The first trap—which I shall deal with briefly, as others have referred to it—is the relationship with growth in the economy. Table A6 on page 113 of the comprehensive spending review reveals the record of past expenditure. It shows that public spending as a proportion of gross domestic product came down fastest and moved to its lowest level on the chart during my period in office as Chief Secretary and shortly after I had left. That rate was achieved because, although it was a time of economic buoyancy, we kept strict control over public expenditure increases, because we did not want to anticipate future growth.

The public sector borrowing requirement and public expenditure as a proportion of GDP have decreased sharply because of the strong economy—a legacy from our period in government—because of revenue buoyancy, and because of Labour's adherence to our strict public expenditure limits. However, history has shown that that situation could change quickly. The swing-around on the current account surplus and the PSBR could be very substantial if some of those factors change. The Chancellor has let go a key element by agreeing to very substantial increases in total public expenditure over the next three years, irrespective of the development of the economy. That is trap No. 1.

Trap No. 2 follows from that: the fact that the programme will span three years instead of one. If one compares tables in the comprehensive spending review with previous public expenditure tables, one will see that they look very similar. The Conservative Government also had three-year programmes, but there were two crucial differences.

Under our programmes, only the first year was absolutely key. Years two and three were indicative, and spending did not increase as substantially as we see in this document. We also had a substantial reserve in years two and three. We see here a substantial increase in years two and three in order to boost the size of the total programmes on health and education. Those figures have been lumped together in order to give what appears to be a much larger figure. However, I notice that the reserve in years two and three is also very slim and small. That is one of the particular dangers facing the Government.

Every Chief Secretary knows that there are always large, unpredictable demands during the year. In this case, they will occur over three years. If the limits are to be kept, where will the money come from? The reserves are not big enough, so it seems inevitable that there will be a clawback from elsewhere, or the figures for years two and three will rise unless savings are made in the existing three-year programmes. I have a feeling that this is a reform—like giving independence on interest rates to the Bank of England—that the Government may regret in due course. I warn that I think that the reserves are too small.

Trap No. 3 is the social security budget, which is outside the three-year programme. As some of my right hon. Friends have pointed out, on a basis of like for like and taking the working families tax credit and other factors into account, the increase in the social security programme is actually £37 billion. That is the big increase in the programme—it is much larger than education and health combined.

The Prime Minister's comments before the election—to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) referred—bear repeating. The Prime Minister said:

"We have said as we get welfare bills down, then we can release more money into education and health services."

It is no good the Government's indicating where they would make cuts; the point is that, in order to demonstrate their prudence, the Government planned to increase education and health spending when the welfare bills were reduced. We all know that the reverse has happened: the welfare bills will increase substantially. That was the Government's policy, but it has been abandoned.

The situation is even worse than that. I believe that, if unemployment rises, that £37 billion will rise considerably—and it is still part of the overall total. I note that the Chancellor confirmed to the Treasury Select Committee yesterday that his forecasts were based on stable levels of unemployment. When those levels rise, the social security bill will also rise considerably.

Trap No. 4 is public sector pay. I was amused to hear the Chancellor say on Tuesday that there would be new developments in public sector pay. He cited three new responsibilities: affordability, inflation and efficiency. As I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend will confirm, in giving the Treasury or Government view to various pay review bodies, the previous Conservative Government always emphasised precisely those points; so the Government's developments are nothing new.

The Chancellor said on Tuesday that the Prime Minister had spoken to the chairmen of the pay review bodies, and he was satisfied that they would take those issues into account. As Chief Secretary, I remember talking to the chairmen of pay review bodies and emphasising precisely the same points. They then advanced what they regarded

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as powerful arguments for ignoring my views entirely. I believe that the Government will find a similar outcome.

We all know that there are serious recruitment and retention problems in relation to nurses and, increasingly, general practitioners and teachers. Recent surveys that I have seen show an alarming drop in the number of students entering teacher training, particularly in areas such as physics. Therefore, I am quite sure that, over the next three years, pay review bodies will believe that they should put greater emphasis on recruitment and retention. That will blow another hole in the three-year programme.

Trap No. 5 is asset sales. Quite a large part of the public sector net investment—or what I would regard as capital expenditure—which is quite low at 1.4 per cent. of the total, is dependent on asset sales. Those asset sales are highly unpredictable. The Conservative Government knew that we could deliver with the many asset sales and privatisations that we undertook. I am very much in favour of privatising National Air Traffic Services, but I doubt whether it will be achieved easily. That dependence on asset sales is another danger.

When the Chancellor abolished advance corporation tax, he expected that it would encourage the private sector to invest substantially. That was part of the rationale behind his move. A survey produced by the Confederation of British Industry and the Association of Consulting Actuaries revealed that only 2 per cent. of companies thought that ACT changes would increase the amount of capital available for investment. Look at the damage that that measure has caused to pension funds and pensioners, and it has not produced the desired result. The same could happen with asset sales.

Trap No. 6 involves how the Government will pay for the programme if they cannot hold to their figures, or if they find that revenue buoyancy disappears. The Government have probably exhausted all the tax squeezes—such as the ACT measure—in order to bring in big extra revenue, so which tax pledges will they have to reverse? Will the strain be taken by higher borrowing and higher interest rates?

I believe that old Labour is back. It was old Labour that applauded the Chancellor on Tuesday. Perhaps that is why the Prime Minister appeared so strained and tense during that session, and why this review will be short-term gain for long-term pain.

7.19 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): In this debate we have heard the old Tory tales of woe—it was tales of woe when they were in government, and it is tales of woe now that they are in opposition. Phrases such as "incompetence", "people are not in charge", "people are too much in charge" and "we have always done better in government" have punctuated Tory speeches tonight, but we all know that their stewardship of the British economy during the past 18 years does not bear comparison with our stewardship of the economy. I should have thought that the last thing that those gentlemen over there would want to do was to talk about their stewardship and to compare their stewardship with ours.

Let us remind ourselves of some of the things that those people across from us got involved in during the past 18 years. Let us examine their record. Who remembers the negative equity under those people over there? Do you remember how the previous Chancellor had to try to devise a scheme to help those in negative equity? There is no talk about that tonight. Do you remember the record of unemployment, at 4.5 million? No one knew the accurate figure.

We also remember, in the area that I come from, Coventry and the west midlands, how the industrial base was eroded. There is no talk about that tonight. Do you also remember the record number of bankruptcies? That was the economic record that the Tories foisted on the British people. Do you remember the speedy withdrawal that they had to make from the exchange rate mechanism, and the devaluation of the pound? Do you remember when interest rates reached 22 per cent.? Again that was their record.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Some of these things I remember, some I do not, but it is best not to ask me what I do or do not remember.

Mr. Cunningham: I am actually asking the House, not you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that my honourable colleagues will remember some of these things.

I am sure that colleagues will remember a generation of young people who never had a job, who were probably unemployable. We must now start to pick up the tab for that and try to train them and get them employment.

Do you remember record crime levels? I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I hope that the House remembers the record levels of crime under the Tories.

We also remember the fact that the Tories created a situation in which people were being paid poverty pay. We also had the 22 tax increases. What did people get out of that? The Tories squandered North sea oil revenues. They do not want to talk about their economic record.

The Tories talk about public sector workers. I seem to remember that, in one Budget, the previous Chancellor talked about zero increases, but said that if there were to be any increases, they had to be allied to increases in efficiency. Does the House remember? Perhaps I am wrong. I shall give way to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) if he wants to put me right.

I welcome the comprehensive spending review because it frees the British people from recession and stagnation. In other words, it offers them hope after they have had 18 years of no hope. Among the things that I welcome is the £21 billion over the next three years for the national health service. That will help us to honour our commitments, not only to start shortening waiting lists, but to start to deal with the capital investment that the national health service needs.

We shall spend £19 billion on education over the next three years. Remember the overcrowding in classrooms? In addition, more than a million kids still have to be educated in schools that were built before the first world war, in the conditions that that implies.

I especially welcome the Government's commitment to pensioners. Obviously, one of the commitments is to provide a better health service but, more important, we are removing for pensioners the iniquitous eye test charges that the previous Government introduced. Some Conservative Members opposed the introduction of those charges; I remember talking to some of them at the time.

I welcome the transport White Paper. I hope that it is published very soon indeed, because one of the most contentious items for us in the west midlands and for people throughout the country has been the fact that some authorities pay for free transport for pensioners and some do not. One often finds that Tory areas do not.

I welcome the cut that was previously made in VAT to help, not only pensioners, but some of the most needy families in Britain, on the poverty line, to pay their fuel bills. Equally, I welcome the further announcement made by the Secretary of State for Social Security that further funds will be provided to help pensioners with their fuel bills. About 1.7 million pensioners are on the poverty line in this country.

The Secretary of State for Social Security will also announce that, by next April, every pensioner will have a minimum pension guarantee. That is very important because many pensioners feel that they do not get an adequate pension.

The £2.5 billion set aside for tax guarantees means that pensioners will be allowed to retain up to a certain level of any income. We are still waiting for an announcement of what the taxation might be beyond that level, but at the moment many pensioners feel aggrieved by virtue of the fact that, if they take a part-time job to supplement their pension, they very often find that it is taxed away.

I welcome the commitment to do something for third-world debt. Colleagues will remember that, in our election manifesto, we committed ourselves to an objective of devoting 0.7 per cent. of gross national product to alleviating third-world debt. The Chancellor's announcement shows that we are halfway there. I believe that very many people will welcome that. We also committed ourselves to consider the whole issue of third-world debt and third-world poverty. There certainly will be some negotiations, but under the previous Government, the amount devoted to alleviating third-world debt actually fell by 2 per cent. a year.

The £21 billion funding for the national health service will certainly start to shorten waiting lists. There will be a 50 per cent. increase in capital investment in buildings and equipment, and £5 billion will be made available for national health service modernisation, which will give us the largest building programme of the past 50 years.

Other hon. Members, like myself, will know of drug abuse problems in parts of their constituencies. In my constituency, we have major problems with drug abuse. Allied to that, in certain instances, we get crime, but more important, we get murder associated with crime. We also get intimidation, if not murder, and that creates major problems for our young people. Unlike the previous Government, we shall increase by about 25 per cent. the budget for the unit that deals with drugs and crime.

I welcome the fact that we shall spend about £3.6 billion to renovate 1.5 million homes and, equally, to help the homeless. Some hon. Members probably spend at least one night a year sleeping out, to draw the nation's attention to the fact that hundreds—probably thousands—of people are homeless, destitute and without hope.

This is a Budget of hope. It shows fairness, but equally strength. I believe that it is a Budget that sets us on the road to enhance our reputation in the world.

7.26 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Later in my speech, I shall ask the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) whether he remembers the run on the pound and the Government going with a begging bowl to the International Monetary Fund.

First, I shall turn my attention to the word "prudent". It is a rather recycled word, because it has been bandied around the Treasury for some time. My friend, Norman Lamont—we shall very soon call him Lord Lamont—often used the word "prudent". The question is, what does it mean?

The present Chancellor has defined the word strangely. He has defined it in terms of the golden rule, by which one is prudent on the capital account but can be imprudent on the current account. That is a strange concept. Professor Buiter of the Monetary Policy Committee has rubbished the idea of the golden rule in that context—certainly in the context of trying to define prudence. He has pointed out the relationship, which has existed since time immemorial, between capital expenditure and current expenditure. In the public sector it is difficult, in many cases, to define what is capital expenditure and what is current expenditure. Is road maintenance capital or current? It happens to be defined as capital expenditure, but it might just as easily be defined as current expenditure. Everyone knows that, the more capital expenditure one has, the more current expenditure one has, so it is a nonsensical distinction.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) said yesterday in the Treasury Select Committee, it is doubly nonsense in the context that we are discussing at the moment. I noticed on the front page of *The Times* today that old canard, the effect of spin, in the sense that the front-page article spoke of surpluses ahead, defining the surplus merely in terms of the current account. I do not know whether the author of the article realised that.

The actual position is very different. If we are considering prudence, we need to consider affordability. That is partly a political perspective. I have a view about the affordability of public spending in terms of the need for limited public expenditure which allows the private sector to flourish and generate the products that allow the public sector to spend. That is a political view.

Another aspect of affordability that interests both sides of the House is the management of the macro-economy. Affordability is directly related to fiscal policy, which must be seen in terms of its relationship with monetary policy. Given the Bank of England's independence on monetary policy, if public spending rises out of control, as may well happen, and if inflation is the outcome of the expenditure release, interest rates will go up. That will result in a conflict of policy for the Government, with inevitable implications for affordability.

The Government's programme and their claim of prudence must be judged against the facts. Total public expenditure will rise by 2.75 per cent. Under the Government's own projection for the next three years, gross domestic product will go up by 2.5 per cent.—that is, less than the projected level of public expenditure. Public spending as a percentage of GDP will therefore rise. There are no ifs and buts about that: it is a fact.

As my right hon. and hon. Friends have pointed out, the Government's assumptions are extremely optimistic. The growth rate figures are substantially different from

[Sir Michael Spicer]

the growth rate figures produced in the Budget just four months ago. The projections in the Budget ranged from 0.75 per cent. to 2.25 per cent. The central projection of the Government's latest programme assumes a rate of 2.5 per cent. I asked the Chancellor yesterday what enormous changes had occurred in the economy over the past four months to produce such a substantive change in the Government's assumptions about GDP for the future.

The Government's forecast is optimistic in other respects as well. Unemployment figures appear to be almost static. If that turns out not to be the case, the effect on public expenditure in terms of unemployment benefit and so on would be much greater than is implied. That is why the Government's figures show public expenditure as a percentage of GDP rising from 1999 onwards.

When I asked the Chancellor about that in the Select Committee yesterday, he spent a long time talking about the fact that next year the figure would go down. He failed to mention a pretty fundamental point—that next year is the last year in which the Conservative expenditure totals will apply. After that we will see Labour's true colours and the Government's real programme, in which public expenditure as a percentage of GDP increases.

We are getting back to business as usual on the political scene. The old-fashioned Labour-inspired vicious circle is emerging in the management of the economy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) mentioned, high expenditure must be followed by higher taxing, unless there is to be the printing of money and higher borrowing. Higher taxes will mean higher interest rates than are good for the economy, which will lead to inflation or higher taxation to pay for the higher expenditure, which will then have to be paid for out of higher taxation.

We are leaving the good old days of sensible Conservative budgeting and moving, after 1999, into the classic Labour territory of high tax and high spend. Those of us who were Members of Parliament when a Labour Government had to suffer the humiliation of going cap in hand to the IMF know that it was those policies that led to that result. If we are going down memory lane, let us go back to the last Labour Government, who had the same economic policies as the present Government. The prospect of a run on the pound and of the Government eventually having to seek help from the IMF are not fantasies. That is the logical outcome of what always happens under a Labour Government.

The Government are leaving behind the anchor of Conservative policies, which they accepted. The controls will apply next year, but we know from the Government's own figures that after that, public spending as a percentage of GDP, and therefore taxation, will rise. They have boxed themselves in by making the Monetary Policy Committee independent, no doubt because they did not trust themselves on the matter. The concomitant interest rate rises will make matters more difficult for the Government and the country.

The electorate was warned at the last election, but was not in a mood to accept those warnings. It was as clear as day that, despite all the froth and the spinning that went on at the beginning, as long as the Labour Government kept to Conservative policies, we were in fairly safe territory. They promised the country at the time that Conservative expenditure controls would be maintained for a year or so. We foresaw what would happen, but the country was not in a mood to accept it.

I expect that it will not be long before the mood in the country changes, as people recognise what they will get from a Labour Government. It is a great irony that just as the Government's new deal—a typical Labour programme for spending money on trying to overcome the unemployment problem—comes into effect, unemployment will begin to rise inexorably. No doubt there will be all the interventions that we get from a Labour Government, and certainly higher taxes. There is misery ahead for the country under this Administration. The quicker they are changed, the better.

7.37 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I shall begin with some general comments about the comprehensive spending review and the Government's approach. It is not always easy to question where money is spent and whether it was spent on the correct priorities in the past. The review has tried to do that and has come up with some different answers. We should all welcome that.

I shall not dwell on specific outcomes. Everyone is aware of the extra money for health, international development, science and so on. I am particularly happy about the extra money to be spent on education, much of it on capital programmes in schools. The condition of buildings is not the only aspect that matters, but it is important. After years of cuts, the increase in spending will do much for teachers' morale. If my right hon. Friends at the Treasury want to finish the job of improving teachers' morale, perhaps they will suggest to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment that he rapidly terminate the contract of Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools.

Further education will have an extra 8 per cent. funding. I used to work in further education area and I very much welcome the increased funding. That sector has been grossly undervalued. There is low morale among those who work within it and a need for recovery. If we are to deliver on our training objectives, we must improve on what is happening in FE.

I very much welcome one of the smaller items in the comprehensive spending review which relates to further education—the piloting of an education maintenance grant for 16 to 18-year-olds, with the purpose of improving the staying-on rate among students from poorer families. I am sure that the pilot will work and that we shall thereafter extend the grant nationwide. I gently suggest to the Government that the principle of maintenance grants to help poorer students go into education is one that they might consider for higher education as well as further education.

Housing is another part of public spending where many important decisions still need to be made. That links with the welfare benefits review. A housing inspectorate is being set up to oversee management in local authorities. Clearly there is nothing wrong with improving standards of management; tenants deserve good management. However, I question whether we should focus only on management in local authorities. My experience of increasing contact with housing associations is that some are very good, but the management practices of others leave quite a lot to be desired. I do not believe that the

Housing Corporation provides effective oversight of associations' management practices. There is a gap in public accountability, especially as increasing amounts of money are going in that direction.

Housing is not only about good management. Clearly we cannot provide a good-quality physical housing environment without money, without investment. We know—it has been mentioned earlier—the appalling record of housing investment over the past 10 to 15 years. Investment is now far lower than it was 20 years ago. There is an appalling problem of supply in the social housing rented sector, especially in large cities. The situation in London is probably the worst of all. The problem of supply cannot be met by better management. It cannot be met without money, without investment.

Of course I welcome the £3.6 billion that will be put into the social housing rented sector, but I have the impression that it will be very much targeted at refurbishment. There is obviously a job to be done in refurbishment—there are extremely serious problems of disrepair—but that approach will not fundamentally affect the supply side of the equation. Oddly, it could make things worse in the short term. My experience of large-scale local authority and housing association refurbishment schemes is that often they require a decant—tenants being moved. Often these schemes take away part of the supply which might be used for other purposes.

There is nothing wrong with refurbishment, but there is still the question of what public expenditure is directed to the supply side. We know that it is not just a matter of throwing money at these projects. All the evidence suggests that we cannot engage successfully in refurbishment and redevelopment without proper tenant involvement and support. That was mentioned specifically in the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Tuesday. If tenants feel ownership of an improvement scheme, the scheme is much more likely to be successful.

There are clear limits on spending in the new deal. It has been announced that £800 million will be spent on regeneration. That can be a good way of creating employment and training opportunities if it is tied in with housing regeneration. There is real scope, with imagination, for having housing regeneration linked to training and employment.

Other unresolved housing cost issues relate to public expenditure on housing benefit—about £11 billion—and rent levels. There is much evidence that rents are a major consideration in people's minds when they are considering whether they can get off benefits and move into work. I recall what was said in my right hon. Friend's statement on Tuesday about the minimum guaranteed income for pensioners. That implies a close look at the links between, for example, pensions, the tax system and the benefits system. It seems to me that the same approach is necessary when looking at people's housing costs and whether public money is spent in the best or the right way, whether we are getting the best value for that money and whether it fits in with other Government objectives. We need the comprehensive spending review and the benefits review, when it comes along, positively to interact with housing costs. That relates to social housing rents and subsidies.

The working families tax credit improves matters. There is no doubt that a taper of 55 per cent. compared with one of 70 per cent. for family credit is a big improvement; it means that the poverty trap will not be so deep. Such reforms will substantially reduce the numbers of households that pay high rates of marginal tax at the stage when they are getting into work. However, the improved incentives for tenants on the current proposals will depend critically on their rent levels. Tenants at the lower end of the rent scale will be taken out of housing benefit and council tax benefit. The higher the rents, the more extensive the overlap will be, as things stand, between tax credit and existing housing benefit tapers. That is because the tax credit scheme is more generous than existing schemes, extending further up the earnings scale.

We could end up with—we end up with this under present housing benefit systems—a wider overlap that extends much further up the income range, where significant marginal deductions occur. When we come to the benefits review, that needs to be addressed in relation to what is done under the comprehensive spending review.

Rents relate to public expenditure on subsidies. We know what the previous Government did. Their policy was quite simple: cut subsidies and force up rents in social housing. That was a clear policy. As a result, we have seen some developments, especially housing association developments in big cities such as London, become virtual ghettos. Tenants cannot afford to continue living in them unless they receive housing benefit. They are virtually dependent on that benefit.

In the private rented sector, where cuts were made in housing benefit by the previous Government, there was the ridiculous philosophy that tenants would somehow be able to bargain with landlords about their rents. Certainly in the big cities, tenants in the private sector, such as elderly people and people from minorities, are often the most deprived and the least likely to be able to bargain. They live in awful conditions. We need to examine how some of the £3.6 billion that will be spent on housing improvement will reach some of the people who live in terrible private rented conditions as well as the people on major estates.

That is another challenge for the use of social exclusion money. It may be true that larger estates have major concentrations of youth unemployment and deprivation, but many other deprived people are living, scattered, in the private rented sector.

I return to the issue of rents. It could be argued—I am sure that there is some truth in the argument—that merely lowering rents is not a panacea; in other words, lowering social housing rents does not solve all the problems. Of course it does not, because that does not do anything to address the condition or supply of housing. Increased rents, however, would conflict with other Government intentions, and we need to consider that carefully within the context of the comprehensive spending review. We do not want welfare to work or policies to combat exclusion to be affected adversely by what is happening to people's housing costs.

Housing costs matter because they are up-front costs and people do not always appreciate the impact of in-work benefits such as housing benefit. Housing costs are at the forefront of people's minds when they consider whether they can afford to get off benefits and into work or to take a particular job.

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

Those are areas of unfinished business surrounding the comprehensive spending review and forthcoming announcements. There has been a great deal of good in this week's announcements, but I hope that the Government will consider those other issues and, as further announcements come, take great care to ensure that they fit in with the good intentions in the comprehensive spending review proposals.

7.50 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): A number of hon. Members want to participate in the debate, so I shall try to be as brief as possible.

In 15 years as a Member of the House, this is the first time that I have felt compelled to take part in an economic debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) said, the debate is an occasion of some importance, because it marks the end of the Labour party at least paying lip service to some sort of financial rectitude and responsibility and the start of a classic Labour binge.

My constituency in north Oxfordshire is classic middle England, and I am concerned that middle England is simultaneously conned and ripped off—conned, because people are led to believe that far more money will be spent on health and education than will actually be spent; ripped off, because, as a consequence of the Government's obvious failure to control public spending overall, taxes will inevitably rise. I shall make a number of predictions, and will be happy to be tested on them at the next general election: as a consequence of this failure of a spending review, taxes and interest rates will be higher than they need be and higher overall. Mortgage interest rates will also be higher, as a result of higher interest rates.

We can test the Labour Government by their own words. What is clear beyond peradventure is that they have already failed to control social and welfare spending. Before the general election, we heard a lot from the Labour party about its intention to cut welfare bills by getting people off social security and into work. It also said that it would reduce the proportion spent on the welfare bills of social failure. In a comprehensive spending review at this stage in the Parliament, one would have expected an attempt to be made to show some kind of control over welfare spending. After all, each and every person in work spends £15 a day on taxes for welfare spending. That has not happened; indeed, every single item of welfare spending in the review increases social security spending.

In 1992, in the depths of the previous recession, when unemployment was 50 per cent. higher than now and thousands of home owners were receiving help with mortgage repayments, the social security bill was £60 billion. After six years of economic growth and increasing economic prosperity, the bill is £100 billion. In two years, it will be £120 billion. Health and education will supposedly receive an extra £40 billion over three years from the increase in public spending. Social security spending alone will take an extra £20 billion in only two years, and those figures would increase if unemployment returned on any scale.

The Labour Government have already completely failed to tackle welfare spending and the social security bill, and they have clearly acknowledged that. When the Prime Minister was challenged on that yesterday, and when other Ministers have been challenged, they have simply said to us, "What would you reduce?" The Government were elected on a manifesto that said that they would reduce spending on social security, but the review will substantially increase such spending, and that new Labour would be wise spenders, not big spenders, but the review totally fails to control spending.

The image that the Government present is that we can achieve the improvements that we want in health, education and every other area without having to dig deeper into our pockets for taxation, but history shows that that just does not happen. If the Government are to spend more money, it will inevitably come from higher taxes and higher interest rates—binge now and bill later.

As every commentator has pointed out, the public spending review is based on the assumption that there will be continuing high rates of growth. I do not know where Ministers have been recently, but, as a member of the Trade and Industry Committee, I have been out visiting businesses up and down the country and talking to business men. Ministers may not have noticed, but I should have thought that the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) would tell the House that there is already recession in large parts of the United Kingdom—for example, in manufacturing industry in the west midlands.

The high level of sterling has made life extremely difficult for exporters and for other sectors of the economy. The idea that we shall have high economic growth on the most optimistic figures that will continue year on year is a pipe-dream, but we do not have to look far for Labour party pipe-dreams. Before the general election, we were told of two early pledges. We now learn that the word "early" means not that they will be delivered early, but that they were made before other pledges. How much can one trust a party that plays that sort of word game?

Two impressions were given to my constituents and to people up and down the country. The first was that class sizes in primary schools could be reduced to 30 or below by abolishing the assisted places scheme. That has clearly been shown to be nonsense, hence the rush to give the impression that extra money is being given to education. The second was that national health service waiting lists could be reduced by 100,000 by removing general practitioner fundholders and some of the administration that goes with that. That has been shown to be bunkum, as waiting lists have increased substantially.

My constituents are being conned, because the impression is being given that health and education are receiving a bonanza in new spending, but the rise in NHS spending is only little more than is needed to maintain existing standards of provision. There has been quite a lot of triple counting and taking no account of inflation. As this Parliament proceeds, there will be increasing pressures in health and education as people begin to appreciate that the amount of money put into those two services is not as great as the Government spin to us and would have us believe.

What is especially significant is that those two areas are dependent on the people who work in them. Nowhere in this spending review has any proper account been given to how to deal with public sector pay, except to say that public sector pay review bodies will have to have regard

to spending targets. I will make another prediction that, between now and the next general election, as their growth targets are not met, we will see the Government seeking to meet the shortfall in health and education spending, by putting the squeeze on those who work in health and education. That will be dispiriting for them.

When all the froth of the public spending review is settled and people have really had a chance to look carefully at the figures, they will see that many people are in danger of simultaneously being conned and ripped off. Conservative Members are determined to ensure over the coming months and years that people appreciate the extent to which they are in danger of being conned and just how much they are ripped off. We will ensure that, at the next general election, people really appreciate that the Government have sold out on the economic management of this country in a way that is greatly to the detriment of every citizen in our land.

8.1 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am glad to have an opportunity to speak because I want to reflect the widespread support felt in my constituency for the Chancellor's statement on Tuesday. That support comes because of the clear commitment to invest in public services. My constituency is in the heart of South Yorkshire and has suffered from years of decline in the coal, steel and railway industries and from years of undermining of public services by the previous Government.

As we all know, massive industrial decline leads to poverty and social exclusion. Providing a decent education for young people is vital if we are to give them any hope of overcoming the problems that go along with industrial decline. That is why the extra resources announced in the last Budget were so welcome. It meant that £5 million went to schools in the Doncaster area. That put into reverse years of cuts and years of reductions in teacher places. Schools were able to pull themselves out of the crisis that had been created by the nursery voucher scheme. When we put the money available then together with the money announced on Tuesday, it will make a real difference to so many young people in my constituency.

The regeneration of an area such as Doncaster depends on good public transport. Put simply, many of my constituents cannot afford a car and depend on public transport to get to work. About 40 per cent. of them do not have access to a car and investment in public transport is vital for them. The Government have already given the go-ahead for a new transport interchange in Doncaster, but the announcement of a further £1.7 billion to invest in public transport will improve the employability of many people in my area and will provide much-needed jobs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) talked about the need for accountability in housing associations. We also need to ensure that we have accountability in the provision of bus services, which are important in my area if people are to get to work. Services need to be planned and dependable, and there needs to be accountability. At the moment, companies often withdraw services without any consultation with local people and that can put jobs in danger because people cannot always get to their workplace.

I know that many hon. Members have talked about housing, and I want to touch on that. The announcement of a further investment of £3.6 billion to improve council housing stock has been greatly appreciated in my area. Nothing better illustrates the Chancellor's principle of money in return for modernisation than housing. The release of capital receipts that has already taken place has meant that we have been able to rewire 503 properties in the Doncaster area. A total of 834 properties will have central heating installed, and 571 will have double glazing put in. That means that more than 2,000 properties will be modernised, and 2,000 families will have their lives directly improved by the actions of this Government. Also, as those properties are handed on to others, the effect will become more widespread.

There is more to be done. We have a housing stock of 29,000 of which more than 7,000 still have no central heating, more than 500 still have outside lavatories, nearly 18,500 need rewiring and nearly 25,000 do not have double glazing. We must give emphasis to modernising housing because we all know that poor housing leads to poor health. Rundown estates suffer high levels of crime and drug problems, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham). People give up hope and opt out of society. Whole estates can become isolated and those who live on them have no hope.

Investing in housing not only improves people's lives directly, but improves their health and provides jobs and skills training. That is why the Government's move, which will be carried out in partnership with local government, is so welcome. We are looking at how we can regenerate those areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) talked about the report of the coalfield communities task force. The task force was set up by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Its report shows how important it is to co-ordinate departmental initiatives if we are properly to regenerate areas of industrial decline. Improving the housing stock leads to better health, reduced crime and more jobs. Raising educational standards and developing skills means that young people are more employable and that breaks the cycle of despair that has been only too prevalent in my constituency over the past 18 years.

The Chancellor's statement on Tuesday was important because it recognised the importance of integrating all the different areas of Government responsibility and how we can bring about regeneration through Government action. It was not a piecemeal approach. It put the pieces of the jigsaw together and the picture it presented was one of a much brighter future for many people in my area who have suffered for too long. That is why I welcome the statement and why it has been so welcome in my constituency.

8.9 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): There has been much discussion of the comprehensive spending review's arithmetic. I should like to return to some of the issues that were raised helpfully and lucidly by the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). They are what could be called the chapter 4 issues relating to public sector management.

In many respects, the Government's contribution in that area has been positive in the paper and more generally. In some areas, we strongly endorse their actions; the first of those endorsements is for the adoption of fiscal

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

responsibility targets. The Government have committed themselves to fiscal objectives that may ultimately prove embarrassing for them, but the fact that they have openly accepted them is creditable and sensible.

There are good examples in the document of inter-departmentalism. Chapter 21, which has not so far been mentioned, deals with the way in which children's concerns will be meshed across Departments. That is exemplary. At this stage, it is rhetoric rather than delivery, but the principles are good. Such positive thinking is taking place on the problem of domestic violence. The third and most positive aspect is that the Government have adopted medium-term financial planning in the public sector.

I used to prepare comprehensive spending plans for the private sector, and it was often difficult to persuade colleagues that it was desirable to escape from the constraints of the short term. People said that, as the future could not predicted, we should not make plans. The result was living from hand to mouth with spurts of expenditure at the end of each financial year and massive inefficiency. It is good practice in the private and public sector to have the kind of medium-term planning that the Government have introduced.

In some ways, success is likely to be marred by two failures. The first of those is excessive secrecy and the other, which is more important and has not been discussed, is over-centralisation. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) spoke about secrecy in the context of the democratic principle. There have been good examples of consultation, one of which was the Independent Schools Information Service paper, where public consultation led to response and improved policy. In this debate, we are dealing with an issue on a vastly greater scale that has simply sprung out of the Government machine and been presented as a final product. That is not a good way to conduct public business.

As a result of such introverted decision making, the Government have created for themselves more problems than are necessary. For example, the credibility of the comprehensive spending review depends on a single-line Government forecast of the future. There was no reason for the Government to box themselves in like that. If inflation or output are worse than expected, the Government's programme will be difficult to sustain. One way of dealing with the public would be to discuss, in a spirit of open government, the logic of some of the future scenarios and possibilities. That happens in good public and private sector organisations. The Government could rehearse some of the problems that may arise if there is higher inflation or lower output. They could state how they would deal with it, whether through taxation, borrowing or by reduced expenditure.

We have been pressing the Government to make it clear that the spending targets are inflation-proof and recession-proof. Of course we want them to be, but it is right to be clear about whether that is implied in the review. It is essential that those who will work with the public expenditure figures should be clear about the assumptions on which they are based. Secrecy does not help the process, and it is unnecessary and damaging.

In terms of centralisation, the Government have drawn many of their ideas about public sector contracts from New Zealand. We welcome that and, indeed, advocated it because New Zealand is a good model. There are many useful lessons, but New Zealand is a different country. It not only has more open government but is small. It is smaller than Scotland or London and in a country such as Britain it is important for public sector management to be much more decentralised.

Most of us who deal with councils are aware of the problems that will arise because of the relationship between a centralised system of public sector contracts and a highly constrained, capped local council. I have a vision of how the system will be driven. Bright, young people, probably technocrats, in the Treasury will set broad targets rather like those that are set by inspecteurs de finance in France. They will be set at the top with little participation from the grass roots. I shall give a few examples of how that top-down system of public sector planning goes wrong.

I am sure that hon. Members have experience, as I have, of a council that takes education seriously and tries to raise its game and meet or exceed the Government's objectives. The council hits capping limits and tries to draw resources from other parts of its budget such as social services. Because that budget has been drawn down, the problems of bed blocking in the local hospital are increased. The Government's answer is to point to the section in the review that says that social services and the health service will pool and co-ordinate resources. However, while councils are constrained by tough capping limits, it will be impossible to build in such flexibility.

The other problem with over-centralisation is that all the output targets, which sound plausible in conceptual terms, become crude when applied locally. We favour moving away from the idea of a public sector that is driven by inputs of money to one that thinks about service output. However, that must be considered locally in a way that responds to the market and the local environment. I shall give one or two local examples of what goes wrong when centralised targets are used as the basis for public sector planning.

To improve their standard assessment test ratings, many schools are increasing school exclusions. School performance is improved because people are driven by targets, and the troublemakers are put out on the streets. That is understandable, but kids on the streets get into petty crime and that fouls up the local police performance targets. The police make arrests, clear up the problem and the kids go into a young offenders institution. The school and the police are happy, but the kids may be learning a life of crime. In my area, an institution that was doing valuable preventive work was closed. It worked with families and tried to stop the problems that lead to social exclusion in the first place. Because the output of such institutions cannot be measured and because they are not high priority bits of the bureaucracy they are being cut.

Exactly the same is happening in the health service as a result of top-down, centralised directives. We all support the objective of cutting waiting lists. Sometimes, there are directives from the regions or from the Secretary of State to hospital trust managers to cut waiting lists. The careers of those people will be impaired if they do not succeed, so they shuffle the pack and acute cases are pushed further

down the line. The funding for local family planning clinics, which have a low priority and no measurable output, may be cut instead.

The underlying problem in public sector management is over-centralisation and targets driven from the top. Such problems were extreme in the Soviet Union, but they have been produced even in this democratic, market society. The Government must think more clearly about how the management of the public sector—many of their ideas are admirable—is to be decentralised.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk hit on a valuable point when he spoke about the growing difficulties of the public sector labour force. There is particular experience of that in London. I think that the hon. Member for Dagenham (Ms Church), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, produced some devastating figures on the shortage of teachers in London. There are growing problems over the shortage of nursing staff because nurses are being attracted to much more lucrative occupations.

Over the past few days, I have discovered that there is an acute, chronic recruitment crisis in the police force. That can be met only by recognising that the labour market in the public sector operates in different ways throughout the country. There has to be flexibility. The system must be decentralised. Different occupations and different regions have to be able to offer different returns. As long as public sector pay, as well as other sectors of public sector management, are driven from the top and are over-centralised, the system is simply not going to work.

8.19 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends and the Government on the comprehensive spending review, and on the emphasis on raising standards in schools, rebuilding the NHS, improving public transport and tackling crime. I am tempted to say that those are the people's priorities. They are certainly my constituents' priorities, and were the priorities on which I campaigned in the general election.

I believe that the priorities are right and are what the electorate voted for in May 1997. They have been planned and introduced in the review soundly and, yes, prudently. By announcing three-year spending plans, agencies that are involved in delivering public services can plan to improve those services—a more sensible approach than hitherto—and aim to deliver the modernisation that is required.

There have, of course, been many notable achievements by the Government in the first 15 months. Notwithstanding those achievements, one of the outstanding aspects of the Government and their policies is that they are laying down firm foundations for the future. Their policies are for the medium and long term, in stark contrast with the Conservative party, which was almost entirely short-termist when in government, to the detriment of us all. In fact, the only long-term aspect about it was its 18 years in power—18 wasted years.

How good it is to have a Government who will deliver improved public services and are delivering on their manifesto pledges, providing much-needed resources and addressing infrastructure requirements. However, while heaping praise on the Government, I should like to express a concern that derives from my experience as a new Member and from the close observation of the circumstances of a sizeable minority of my constituents. The one concern that I have is in relation to social housing; it is shared by my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton).

What I am about to say is not a special constituency plea, although I will not object, of course, to any particular help being given to my constituents. I raise the issue because I believe that it is important throughout the nation. It has got out of hand largely because of policies that were pursued by the Opposition when they were in government. We must start to address it urgently.

I recognise that the Government will provide extra investment of £3.6 billion to begin to tackle the backlog of investment in council housing inherited from the previous Government. More than 1.5 million council houses will, I read, benefit from that additional investment. I welcome those additional resources as well as the housing inspectorate, and the obligations on local councils to account for their investment decisions, and to give tenants more say in how their homes are managed and maintained. However, my concern is that those welcome measures may not go far enough. If the problems that undoubtedly exist are not dealt with, other public expenditure may be required which could, if the right decisions are made now, be avoided.

Upminster has more than 6,300 local authority houses. More than 90 per cent. of them were built immediately after the second world war, largely in Harold Hill, a London overspill estate that was planned and built cheaply by London county council. Many of the houses are now privately owned—about 60 per cent. of the original stock has been sold under the right-to-buy scheme, leaving the council with a depleted stock with which to address social needs. There is only minimal provision from housing associations.

More than 2,000 people are on the London borough of Havering housing waiting list for transfers and accommodation, usually because of growing families. About half of those on the waiting list are my constituents, and the others are shared between my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and for Romford (Mrs. Gordon). Of the issues that are referred to me in my advice surgeries, approximately 60 per cent. are housing related. Most of the issues of social exclusion, crime and poor health have at their root inadequate housing. I have no doubt about the need to improve social housing stock.

For far too long, the links between poor housing and poor health have not been not officially recognised. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said last year in a speech to the London Housing Federation:

"anyone with a shred of common sense knows that housing affects people's health".

Housing conditions affect both mental and physical health. Dampness, condensation, cold housing, mineral fibres, carbon monoxide from gas appliances, infestation and poor layout and design all contribute to poor health. In the UK, an estimated 1.6 million homes—one in 14—are officially unfit for human habitation.

Recent research referred to in the July edition of *London Age*, the magazine of Age Concern in London, and undertaken in the London borough of Hackney provides very good evidence of that. It showed that improvements in a particular housing estate in that borough resulted in residents making 30 per cent. fewer

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

visits to general practitioner surgeries and in more than 20 per cent. fewer attendances at hospital out-patient departments. On a Stepney estate, more than 60 per cent. of residents considered their illness to be housing related.

It is estimated that 169,000 households in London are overcrowded. Much of the housing stock is also old, with 65 per cent. of houses built before 1945. London has the highest figures for homelessness, continually escalating social housing waiting lists and an increasing number of old people living alone. There is also proportionately less residential care than elsewhere in the UK, yet investment in the capital's social housing is rapidly decreasing. The London housing survey suggests that there are more than 99,000 households in which older or disabled persons require some form of adaptation to their property.

Apart from health and social exclusion, the consequences of inadequate housing go further. It is obvious from crime statistics that poor housing often leads to increasing crime rates and, obviously, an adverse knock-on effect on public expenditure. The launch of the new regeneration package to tackle the multiple problems of the most deprived areas will help, but I am unsure whether the new focused single regeneration budget will reach areas such as Harold Hill where it is needed most. If areas such as those that I have described do not benefit from the SRB and do not receive a sufficient share of housing investment, I foresee difficulties and, indeed, an adverse effect on public expenditure.

I warmly welcome the comprehensive spending review, but I felt it right to flag up, with my hon. Friends, the concerns that I genuinely hold, in the hope that further consideration will be given to those issues. If long-term investment is made in housing, it will have positive benefits for other sectors of public expenditure. Therefore, I am sure that it will be worth while not only for those who directly benefit, but, in the long term, for all taxpayers.

8.27 pm

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): In many ways, I welcome the direction of the Chancellor's statement on Tuesday. I should like to concentrate on the impact of his announcements on Scotland, and to raise several issues consequent on the announcements by the Secretary of State for Scotland on the impact of the comprehensive spending review on Scotland.

May I begin with some compliments for the Government. I am sure that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury will be horrified to hear that, but I assure her that it will not last for the entirety of my speech. First, I compliment the Government on the three-year spending plans. They will give some stability to planning and allow an eye to the medium term in programme development for a variety of Government Departments. Local authorities will be able to see over the medium term the impact of the Government's financial settlement, which has a substantial bearing on the income of local authorities. However, issues are raised by three-year spending plans and commitments. Many indicators need to remain on track for Departments and local authorities to gain the full value of those three-year spending commitments.

There is a need for some protection against unexpected or higher than expected inflation. Some guarantees should be given to protect the hopes that have been raised by this spending settlement, a point that was raised by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) in his contribution. Perhaps it should lead to an increasing emphasis on building a reserve to ensure some protection against the benefits of the spending plans being undermined if inflation were higher than expected.

Obviously, a heavy caveat to the settlement is the controlling of public sector pay. Investment in health and education is welcome, but for it to be effective, the nurses and teachers who are the backbone of our health and education systems must share the benefits. I am concerned that the programme may be based on an element of pay constraint, which will further undermine the confidence of public sector employees.

The final point that must be borne in mind about the three-year plan is the basic condition of the economy. Failure to deliver the economic growth implicit in the assumptions behind the comprehensive spending review will undoubtedly lead to pressure on the package of proposals. Higher interest rates, a more severe impact on our economy as a result of the Asian financial crisis and the impact of the strong pound could all undermine economic conditions. A fall in tax revenues and an increase in the benefits bill will put pressure on those welcome public expenditure statements.

My second compliment to the Government is on the direction of the additional public expenditure that has been made available. On education, the Scottish National party supported the commitment to provide a nursery place for all three-year-olds in Scotland during the 1997 general election. We welcome the appointment of up to 5,000 classroom assistants to assist in developing standards in our schools. However, much of the explanation of the announcements given by the Scottish Office depends on the application of a better adult-to-child ratio in our schools, which is somewhat different from the pupil-to-teacher ratio that we had tended to consider. However, if the proposal can succeed in raising standards in our schools, it is to be welcomed.

The commitments on health expenditure to reduce waiting lists guarantee that the pressure will be on to ensure that the Government's pre-election commitments are honoured during their term of office. Like other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), I think that the commitments on housing expenditure are important because of the desperate amount of work required in that sector. In many Scottish authorities, it is predicated on the volume of housing debt carried, from which it is difficult to escape.

Undoubtedly, the new spending is welcome, but it must be put in the context of what has happened to public expenditure in Scotland in recent years. We have had four consecutive years of real-terms cuts—two under the Conservatives and two under new Labour. Clearly, the public voted for a renaissance of public services in the general election last year. It has taken some time for that to be forthcoming from the Government. It will start in April 1999, at the beginning of the next financial year, when all the commitments will come into effect. Of course, the Scottish Parliament will be elected in May 1999, so we shall have to await the impact of the proposals on the electoral fortunes of our various parties in those elections. The key is that public services have declined in the past four years in Scotland as well as in other parts of the United

Kingdom. The Chancellor has recognised the need to invest in those public services—and the fact that investment was unavoidable.

I have a couple of concerns about the Government's announcement within the context of the past four years of real-terms cuts in public expenditure in Scotland. Page 109 of the White Paper on the spending review, which was issued on Tuesday, gives comparative data on departmental expenditure limits in real terms from 1993–94 to 2001–02. In that period, Scottish public expenditure reached a high point of £13.8 billion in 1994–95 and a low point in the present financial year of £12.7 billion. In the next three financial years of the comprehensive spending review, it will climb to £13.1 billion, £13.4 billion and £13.6 billion. Even by the end of the period covered by the review, 2001–02, Scottish public expenditure will still be £200 million lower than it was in 1994–95 in real terms, when Ian Lang was Secretary of State for Scotland.

When I checked through the parliamentary record of the announcement of the 1994–95 public expenditure settlement in Scotland, I was amused to find that the opening words of the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), who is now Secretary of State for Defence, but who was at the Dispatch Box opposite Ian Lang then, were:

"When we look behind the figures, expose the creative accountancy and blow away the blizzard of hype, the truth is a whole lot different and much nastier."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 1993; Vol. 234, c. 313.]

We have heard many such sentiments from the Conservatives about the creative accountancy of this settlement, which shows that that can be said by both sides of the House.

I must also compare the Scottish Office departmental expenditure limit with the total limits for the United Kingdom. The Scottish Office level in the table was 7.97 per cent. of the UK total in 1994–95. In the following year, it rose to 8.04 per cent., but in every year since, it has fallen. At present, it stands at 7.74 per cent., next year it will fall to 7.71 per cent., and in following years to 7.63 per cent. and then to 7.53 per cent. in 2001–02. Year by year, Scottish Office public expenditure is steadily eroded in comparison with the total for the United Kingdom. I assume that that is due to the impact of the rigorous application of the Barnett formula, which is often misrepresented in the House. As we all know, rather than being beneficial, it is an expenditure-reducing formula in Scotland and it is population driven, but the Economic Secretary may want to say something about that in her reply.

I can offer the new spending a straightforward welcome because it is welcome in our public services, but we must acknowledge that the Government, in making difficult decisions, have come to conclusions about public services in Scotland that may not all be beneficial. First, the budget available in the Scottish Office to support industry and enterprise will be cut in real terms next year by £56 million or 9 per cent. At a time of rising unemployment, when business confidence is uncertain, I am far from sure that such a cut in enterprise support is appropriate.

An article in *The Scotsman* on Monday by Jeremy Peat, the chief economist of the Royal Bank of Scotland, assessed where the manufacturing sector, which is fundamental to the Scottish economy, is. He writes:

"The total economic picture is the sum of disparate parts. For the 20 per cent. plus of the economy that is represented by manufacturing, the picture is clear. After many moons of expecting major problems, as a result of strong sterling, Asian chaos and the like, these are now with us. Whether you take historic official data or forward looking survey data from the CBI or chambers of commerce; whether you look at the domestic scene or exports, output or orders, the trends are stagnant at best and downwards overall."

If that is the assessment of one of the foremost economists in Scotland of the economy there, I wonder about the wisdom of cutting the budget for industry and enterprise.

When a 15 per cent. cut in that budget was rumoured in 1995–96, under the Conservatives—it transpired to be 7.5 per cent.—the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), who was a Labour spokesman at the time, asked:

"how can we deliver economic prosperity, jobs, and training with such a savage cut? It can't be done."

I was reminded of those sentiments today.

My second concern is the impact on the agriculture budget of a 10 per cent. cut in real terms. I suspect that the cut is due to the BSE factor. We will need to look into other concerns in detail, such as hill livestock compensatory allowances. I see a member of the Select Committee on Agriculture, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), on the Labour Benches. As we all appreciate, the rural economy, which is integral to my constituency, has suffered immensely in recent years.

I welcome the investment in public services, but we must recognise that we need to invest in people as well as in services. The introduction of independent review bodies to regulate public sector pay was welcomed by all parties; the Labour party used to attack any restraint on their recommendations.

In Scotland, one in 10 employees operate in the public sector. In the past year, pay increases have, on average, been 2.6 per cent. in the public sector, whereas they have been 5.6 per cent. in the private sector. However, the Prime Minister's comments on the obligations of the pay review bodies—that they must operate on a basis that is fair, affordable and within Government spending limits—mean, I suspect, that the bodies' independence will be constrained; that is also what I infer from the Chancellor's statement on Tuesday. I fear that the bodies will be limited in their ability to reward public sector workers for the important tasks that they do.

I reiterate that the new money that is being invested in public services is welcome. In the past few days, commentators and journalists have done the public a great service by probing the Government's largesse and dismantling the cumulative expenditure totals to try to explain the phenomenally large telephone-number increases that the Government have suggested. I believe that we are, especially in this debate, getting to the nub of the real impact of the spending. However, there is a real-terms increase, which is welcome in some key areas.

As I said, I am concerned that Scottish departmental expenditure will not reach its level under the Conservative Government. The settlement has been made possible by cuts in public services, and I fear that those cuts will undermine our economic base. Time will tell whether the statement represents a success.

8.41 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): Most hon. Members—certainly all Labour Members—and many more people in the country will have welcomed the Chancellor's spending announcements on Tuesday, which contained generous resources for health and education. That is excellent news for my constituents. I particularly welcome the allocation of £3.6 billion to renovate 1.5 million homes, and the new programme for home energy efficiency.

However—this is a gentle nudge to the Front Bench—I look forward to hearing more from the Chancellor about what we are assured is the Government's commitment to the environment. I am sure that the House is aware that both the first and second reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, praised current excellent progress, but urged greater speed in fulfilling the Government's pledge to put the environment at the heart of policy making. Yes, a large boost for transport has set us on the right road. Moreover, home energy efficiency will play an important role in achieving sustainable development, not only in environment protection and improvement.

Two other strands of sustainable development will also be promoted by home energy efficiency: the economic strand and the social strand. On the economic strand, jobs will be created and household budgets will be eased, which is especially important for people on very low incomes—such as those in parts of my constituency—and for those who are more confined to their homes, such as disabled people and elderly people. The social dimension will also be enhanced, as homes become warmer, healthier and more pleasurable places in which to live, rather than merely to exist.

Energy efficiency is only part of the story, however. To achieve the development we want, we must not only reduce the use of non-sustainable forms of energy, but promote the development and use of renewable forms. Financial measures are necessary to encourage not only efficiency, but renewables. Last autumn, as hon. Members may recall, I asked the Prime Minister to make a statement on Government policy on solar energy.

I welcomed the announcement of the United Kingdom target that 10 per cent. of our electricity needs would be met from renewables by 2010. According to the most recent figures that I have seen, however, only 0.7 per cent. of our needs are met by renewables, which is the lowest percentage in Europe. Friends of the Earth has estimated that 18 per cent. is a realistic target.

I look forward to the Green Paper on renewable energy, which is due to be published shortly. I understand from a recent parliamentary answer by my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry that the Department of Trade and Industry is considering what support the Government could give to encourage the development of all forms of renewable energy, including solar power. Believe it or not, the United Kingdom has a significant solar energy resource.

Like hon. Members from, I am sure, both sides of the House, my concern is that we may do too little, too late. In Britain, we have not only enough sun—given the weather during the past couple of weeks, that may be difficult to believe—but the expertise, and industry now has major opportunities. We lead the world in combined heat and power; we could lead in solar power. Business in solar energy is booming worldwide but, while other countries—including the United States, Japan and Germany—are busy priming the pump, we are in danger of missing out, not least in jobs and exports. Solar energy will be particularly important in currently underdeveloped regions where there is no access to a national grid.

Moreover, consumers are paying more than they need for energy; as I read recently, it is already cheaper to heat a house with solar power than with gas—if householders generate excess solar power, they can sell it back to the grid. Local grid systems are an attractive option, which would increase local accountability. By failing sufficiently to exploit solar power, we are losing out on a major way in which to meet our renewable energy targets—up to a third of our needs could be provided by solar energy.

The Government could adopt a variety of measures to encourage the development of renewables, especially solar energy. However, investment will be essential, and time is not infinite. We all sign up to wanting a healthy environment. In the comprehensive spending review, the Government have made an excellent start in creating one, with resources for transport and home energy efficiency. I look forward to—indeed, I expect—further progress along the lines that I have suggested. If the Government—any Government—invest in the environment, they not only protect the present, but safeguard the future, which is what I believe we all want.

8.47 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I welcome some of the spending increases, especially those on the health service, which was, after all, a Conservative priority for 18 years—spending increased steadily throughout our period in office. I have strong doubts about the affordability of the Chancellor's announcement, but I shall not dwell too much on that; I want instead to talk about the economic credibility of the economic numbers that lie behind the spending forecast.

That credibility depends on two things: first, whether the economy performs as the Chancellor hopes it will; and, secondly, the plausibility of the arithmetic that the Treasury has used to derive the detailed tax and spending numbers. The forecast is optimistic to say the least. It predicts growth falling to 1.75 per cent. and then going back to trend and running at 2.25 per cent. in subsequent years; steady unemployment, when all the indications are that it will rise, with added costs; and inflation steady at 2.5 per cent. The forecast suggests a very soft landing. The Government have made very little provision for the eventuality of a downturn. They are spending money before they have it.

The contingency reserve, at just over 1.4 per cent. of general Government expenditure, is far smaller than the reserve set for the outer years by any of the previous six Chancellors; in fact, it is less than half the average that they provided. I have asked the Library to check whether it is the lowest reserve for the outer years since Denis Healey's first Budget, and I think that the answer will be yes.

The forecast ignores the business cycle: the Government talk as though they have abolished it, with their references to an end to boom and bust, but of course they have not. The cycle certainly continues to exist, and may well come back to bite Labour. When I asked the

Chief Secretary a few weeks ago whether Britain was in an upswing or a downswing or at a turning point, he had no idea. Far too little consideration is being given to the effects of the cycle. We need to examine the cyclically adjusted level of spending to determine whether the plans are affordable.

To give the forecast an air of respectability, the Government have asked the National Audit Office to comment on some of the assumptions. That sounds like a good idea, and some people, including myself, have argued for it for several years, but we should not be deceived: the NAO is merely being asked to look at a few assumptions behind the forecast, and has no remit to look at the forecast itself. For example, it does not analyse what a change of, say, 0.5 per cent. in nominal gross domestic product might do for spending and unemployment, or whether the Government have calculated roughly the right figure for it.

At present, the NAO is not even remotely equipped to try to take on such work. It is not an economic forecasting service, and it is not experienced in the field. No wonder it has come up with little more than vague phrases in its reports. It says that the assumptions are

"broadly consistent with past relationships"

or

"reconcilable with the available evidence",

and no more. That does not lend any credibility to the forecast.

If anyone is in any doubt that the NAO is merely scratching the surface of the job of vetting the forecast, it is worth looking at what resources it is employing to do the job. I asked the Comptroller and Auditor General that question in a Select Committee recently, and he told me that it was spending between £20,000 and £30,000. A fortnight ago, I asked him what resources he would need to do a proper job of vetting the forecast and examining the Treasury's arithmetic behind the assumptions. He will write to me with the answer, but he made it clear that it would be many times the resources that he employs now.

Doing a proper job means doing some of the work that the Treasury undertakes at present, so a fortnight ago I asked the Economic Secretary how much the Treasury spends on that. The answer is nearly £500,000. I have been in touch with the Bundesbank, which vets the German Government's fiscal forecast, and gives its views internally, with the president of the bank sitting in on German Cabinet meetings. The bank spends between DM1.5 million and DM2 million—a little bit more than the Treasury spends—on the task. I asked a consultancy firm, London Economics, what resources it would want to employ to do a proper job of vetting the forecast, and it said that it would take many hundreds of thousands of pounds.

If the NAO is to be prayed in aid to make the Treasury figures look respectable, it needs to be given a much wider remit, and the resources to do the job well. In the meantime, I sincerely hope that we can have an end to all the nonsense that we have been hearing from the Government about the forecast being somehow beyond reproach because the NAO examines it.

Only yesterday, the Prime Minister, in what I consider a disgraceful fashion, went as far as saying that the economic forecasts "have been agreed" by the NAO. That is complete nonsense. The NAO has been asked to examine not the forecast itself but only the assumptions that lie behind it, and it has never alleged otherwise. It has also never said that the forecasts were "careful and cautious", as the Prime Minister said. That is shameful nonsense from the Prime Minister.

If the NAO got to work on the detailed numbers, it might uncover quite a lot. For example, it might challenge the credibility of the golden rule, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) said, has been comprehensively rubbished by Willem Buiter, the Government's own appointee to the Monetary Policy Committee.

The House may be interested to learn that the definition of the golden rule has been the subject of a Supreme Court case in Germany, which forced the Government to make more effort to define what it meant. Apparently, the court concluded that the concept was too vague for the Government ever to be accused of breaking it. That tells us something about its credibility. The German Government have now come up with a more detailed definition, but still very few commentators in Germany take it seriously. A senior member of the Bundesbank recently described it to me as completely meaningless.

I would not mind all this hogwash from the Chancellor and the Prime Minister about auditing the accounts, if they described it as making a start, and if they were making a real bid to bring more transparency to the Government's accounts; but that is not what was in the statement.

When it comes to transparency, the spending review document is inexcusable. The Government have hidden the true treatment of the increases in social security spending in an annexe, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) pointed out.

Several definitions have been altered without proper explanation. A most basic definition, general Government expenditure—it sits in importance alongside the control total, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was talking about earlier—has lain at the heart of Government accounts for a long time, but now we have to grapple with a new concept: total managed expenditure.

Does anyone—the Economic Secretary, perhaps—know the difference between the two numbers? Can she tell me now? Can someone from the Box tell her? I cannot find the answer in the Government's publication; it may be hidden there somewhere, but I have not been able to find it in the past 48 hours. I note that no one is rising to answer my questions. Far from enjoying increased transparency on these crucial numbers, we now have to peer through a fog of changed definitions.

We might be at a defining moment in this Parliament. In the past few weeks, the air of moral superiority has been dealt quite a blow by allegations of cronyism. In the past few days, a big divide has opened up between the parties on tax and spend. We on this side of the House believe in affordable spending and lower taxation. On the other side, they believe in higher and higher spending.

Labour has now rolled the dice. A recession may come before the election or after it, but there will be no going back to what amounts to the beginnings of a spending binge. Quite the opposite: spending Ministers will want more before long. The puny reserve that I described earlier will shortly be exhausted, and, with cash limits also swept away, Departments will not even try to absorb inflation. They will just bid for more if inflation rises.

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

This week may also be a defining moment in a political sense. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is staking a claim to lead old Labour. Perhaps his announcements on eye testing and his references to Nye Bevan had something to do with that. His was a rallying call to all those on the Government Benches who find the crony-ridden behaviour of the modernisers somewhat distasteful. It was a call to those who have never been wholly comfortable with the apparatchiks who surround Tony Blair. If the statement was partly the Chancellor's bid for the soul of his party, it was also a gamble on the economy and with our public services—a gamble he need not and should not have taken. I think that he will probably regret it.

8.59 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I want to confine my remarks to a dry subject—the methodology of reviewing and controlling public expenditure, rather than the outcome itself. That is partly because, like the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), I made my way in the private sector, in a smaller way than he, doing that task.

I spent some time in the early stages of the comprehensive spending review attempting to establish a framework for how that review would operate, at least in my own mind, and seeking—and being courteously treated by Ministers—to get those messages across to the Government. I want to share some of those thoughts with the House this evening.

First, it is critical in a review of this kind to establish clear, demanding targets for the review process. I fear that in this particular case that has been lacking and I commented on it right at the start. Secondly, it is important to define the assumptions and forecasts on which the review will be based. This debate has shown how some of the issues around those assumptions and forecasts might be questioned. Thirdly, it is necessary to decide on the criteria for the process: what is in, what is out and what the fundamental guiding philosophies are of the process itself. The Government ran into difficulty with this at an early stage and fortunately corrected it, for example, on issues relating to charging for visits to doctors and speculation along those lines.

It is necessary to establish clear leadership and decision-making processes for the review. The Government succeeded in that in the end. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer clearly owned the task of ensuring that the outcome was delivered and that was critical. There needs to be a clear division of the activities of Departments into programmes and processes—the things that are spent and the ways in which that spending is supported. It is necessary to analyse those processes into shared processes that run across more than one Department and common processes which are individual to each Department but identical in each place. It is necessary to look at the customer and client base—the people who are to be served through the services and programmes defined—and to decide whether some are impacted in several different ways by different programmes and different processes, and whether there is a need for coherence. Again, the Government's initiative to identify a range of programmes that clearly fit the bill precisely is to be welcomed. They include attention to asylum seekers and dealing with children in care.

It is necessary to establish joint teams on the shared processes between Departments. I met with considerable resistance there on the understandable grounds of the need to protect departmental independence in the review of spending decisions. I shall briefly return to that later. It is necessary to establish joint teams on the programmes serving the same customers and that has been done. There are several initiatives of that kind—I should have liked to see more—which are welcome and look as if they will deliver substantial gains.

It is necessary to use the people who are closest to the customers and taxpayers who are being served. I have always believed it fatal to delegate a task of this kind to a senior management team who are remote from the end result. They are often keenest to protect the hierarchies that lie between. That may have happened in some instances. It is difficult to identify people lower down the chain who can provide the expertise in serving the individuals we want to reach with the programmes.

Those people need to be empowered. It is a hard job to do that because they are remote from the hierarchy above them who are often concerned about the kind of things that they will propose in terms of spending reviews.

Finally, one needs to establish clear ways to monitor the outcomes and criteria for deciding on the success of those outcomes. Again, the Government have made good progress there, certainly greater progress than I have seen in the evidence of other spending reviews, to try to define how to test whether what one says will happen has happened and what one does about failure.

There is much to applaud, but further work needs to be done to review public spending, in the ways that I have outlined, to achieve more rigorous control of the spending process.

Deferring to Departments to manage their own reviews will fail to identify all the key shared points of process and programmes. Expertise and commitment is unevenly spread between Departments, and it is particularly critical that non-core bureaucracy identifies opportunities for savings. It is easy to dismiss bureaucrats as being unhelpful and a waste of resources, but they are critical to the process, and how to motivate those individuals to deliver what is needed is an important task in establishing a review.

Respect for departmental primacy seems curious when we are so free with the mergers and demergers of Departments. After all, the processes that serve our citizens last a lot longer than the departmental structures that we chose to impose upon them.

Information technology has been used as a mantra in this review, as it has elsewhere. IT plays a critical role, but one that must be based on rigorous and harsh adherence to basic rules. First, we have to modernise processes and review programmes based on them before buying new systems. Secondly, we need core common processes which should use core common IT systems. It is criminal to invest in new information systems when an existing package will do the job just fine with amended human processes in the Department concerned.

I have found examples of investment in new payroll systems in Departments. Payroll is a commodity process and a commodity system in IT terms and to invest in new systems, in some cases developed by an IT department within the Department itself, would be prima facie evidence to me of poor management judgment.

We establish common methodologies for managing IT projects and we operate within a clear strategy on data, software and technology. How often in the House do we hear Ministers blame incompatible systems and data for delays in delivering programmes? I have heard that two or three times already in my brief period as a Member of the House, and I am sure that many others have heard it far more often than that.

I have concentrated purely on how reviews might work and how spending should be managed. Other hon. Members have rightly paid tribute to the achievements in terms of delivery of resources to key policy objectives. That is the goal that we all seek, but I hope that my suggestions will help us to build on what has been done.

9.7 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): This evening we have seen the new Labour iron Chancellor ravaged into the old Labour poodle of his party. Every Labour Member who has spoken this evening has called for higher expenditure or welcomed these expenditure announcements. One even called it craven; they were craving for higher expenditure. Here we have it. We will hold the Government to account.

We will see whether the higher expenditure achieves its results. Will it result in lower class sizes and shorter hospital waiting lists? So far, under the Government, the number of those on hospital waiting lists for more than 12 months has doubled and, as for class sizes over 30, the number of five, six and seven-year-olds has risen by some 450,000. So far, the results are not encouraging.

We thought that new Labour was taking on some of our philosophy, and that wealth creation, small and medium enterprises, low inflation and low taxation were among their new ideas. However, the comprehensive spending review is, in truth, a comprehensive spending increase. Time after time, Labour challenges us on the level of public spending. Well, prudent economics demands that the national economy should be able to afford what we spend. We shall increasingly see that Labour's announcements are unsustainable. Interest rates will rise, borrowing will rise, inflation will rise. The economy will begin to run down.

Not everything was wonderful in the 18 years of Conservative Government. Fundamental problems remain to be addressed, such as productivity, which is 20 per cent. below that of the United States, and 30 per cent. lower than that of Germany. I expected the CSR to deal with such matters, but it did not. Every economic decision that Labour has taken since coming to power has been wrong. The Government gave monetary policy to the Bank of England, but asked it to control inflation with only one economic lever. The Bank has not been given an overall economic remit.

Had we been in control of monetary policy, we would have raised interest rates sharply after the election instead of doing it in dribs and drabs. Our two Budgets would have raised taxes. Monetary policy and fiscal policy would have been tightened a year ago, and we would not have the inflationary pressures that are affecting our economy, or pressure to raise interest rates at a time when manufacturing industry is going into recession, and when world demand is slowing down. Labour's policy will lead us into deeper recession.

Anyone who speaks to those who run manufacturing businesses will know what the Government's economic policy has done to them. Many of them have told me during the past couple of weeks that the last quarter has brought a sharp downturn. Interest rates are too high, resulting in a pound that is too high. Exports have dried up, and our balance of payments is rising. The picture is not good.

We cannot ignore the world macro-economic situation. The world's second largest economy, Japan, has run into general recession, and that is bound to affect our economy. First, it will weaken demand for our goods, which are difficult to export at the best of times. Secondly, as the far east recovers, huge currency devaluations of up to 40 per cent. will give a big competitive advantage to export goods coming into our markets. In reaching their assumptions, the Government have not taken into account the recession in manufacturing industry and the world economic position.

Labour has challenged us on how we would reorder spending. Total managed expenditure will rise from about £330 billion to roughly £389 billion. However, the social security budget will increase by a staggering £37 billion, to rocket through the ceiling of £100 billion for the first time. I calculate that to be £20,000 for every man and woman next year. If the Government's assumptions on unemployment or inflation are wrong, the amount will be even larger. Many benefits are linked to the retail prices index, so any increase in RPI will increase social security costs. If the assumption that unemployment will not rise is incorrect—I fear, sadly, that unemployment will rise—unemployment benefits will also go up. Here we have a comprehensive spending review that is said to be based on prudent economic assumptions, but I am not at all sure that it is.

We have watched a golden legacy inherited by the Government slowly being squandered. I want the economy to continue to perform and our country to continue being one of the world's leading manufacturing and industrial nations. I do not want us to be shackled by the bureaucracy coming out of Europe, because I want us to have a real enterprise economy. However, I am afraid that, because of the monetary and fiscal policy adopted by the Government, that will not happen.

Today, consumer demand is still very high and inflationary pressures are strong. The Government could have choked off that demand by proper and prudent fiscal and monetary policy, as I have described, but they have failed to do so. They have failed to encourage saving and the savings ratio is falling alarmingly. In the last Budget, measures were introduced to abolish PEPs and TESSAs and to replace them with the bureaucratic ISA regime. For the long term, that was not a good Budget, and this is not a good comprehensive spending review.

The Government recognise that their assumptions are not robust. At page 48 of "The Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998"—the new blue book, as I call it—paragraph 4.3.7 states:

"the demand for public spending can vary unpredictably due to evolving needs and opportunities."

That is an admission that the Government are not sure that their assumptions are right. At the end of that paragraph, they add:

"However, unexpected shocks due to other influences, such as developments in the world economy, will continue to impact on the British economy."

The Government are not certain that their assumptions are robust. If growth rates are not maintained at the extremely modest levels assumed, if inflation targets are not met and

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

if unemployment starts to rise, the economy will suffer a serious slow down. As has always happened with every single Labour Government of the past, the economy will be in a mess and the new incoming Conservative Government will have to sort it out and recreate the enterprise culture of the world.

9.16 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on having brought some passion to our proceedings. For much of the evening, and certainly during the contributions from Opposition Members, I thought that I had stumbled into an accountancy seminar at KPMG, or something just as boring. Sadly, most of what the hon. Gentleman said was arrant, albeit golden, nonsense, but at least it was delivered with a degree of passion.

It struck me as interesting that, when the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) opened the debate—it feels like that was three days ago—he spent about half an hour ranting on, but never, unless I missed it, mentioned schools, pensions, hospitals or health; his speech was just a miserable little rant. Let me ask the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Cotswold this question: what should we cut? Do not come here with jargon about dampening this or that down—let us put it in front of the people who matter, the electorate in our constituencies, and ask them, "What, of all that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced on Tuesday, would you not do?" Would they halve the billions spent on education, or the billions spent on health? When it comes to the detail and what matters to real people, the Opposition suddenly fall quiet.

I do not want to be overly unkind. It might appear that I castigate Opposition Members, but I do this more in sorrow than in anger. What we have seen over the past couple of days is an attempt by the Conservative party to understand where we are coming from, but they do not understand the language, because they have never been here before, and it is alien to them, so it is not entirely their fault. Perhaps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) said, we should suggest a degree of therapy for them and castigate them gently, rather than in detail.

The Conservatives are not used to the language of priorities, the language of prudence, not profligacy, or the language of reform and modernisation. To be fair to them, they have not missed the plot; they never knew what the plot was in the first place.

The Conservatives do not understand the plot because it is not about stop-go, the quick fix, short-term vandalism for political expediency, splurging—as an hon. Member said earlier at Question Time—or making the poor pay, which is their usual trick. It is about the long term and more resources for modernisation throughout government, which is crucial, with reform at every stage.

There are—I do not say this glibly—59 billion solid reasons why people should be happy about all areas of public spending. Interestingly, the right hon. Member for Wells chose not to mention any of them. They include health, pensions, services for children, social services and education. We have had no substantive response and no answers from the Conservatives—just, God bless 'em, utter confusion. It is not spend, spend, spend; the Conservative response, rooted in that confusion, is whinge, whinge, whinge.

The Opposition's response is chaotic. We listen to one Conservative Member and the response is that the comprehensive spending review is, "An irresponsible electoral binge, and the country cannot afford it." We listen to another, and the response is, "It is not real. It is all smoke and mirrors. It is all hype." One group is saying that we are spending far too much money and the other that we are not spending money at all because there is no money. Even the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who bores the world with a column in *Accountancy Age* every month, has no idea.

Some Conservatives Members say that too much money will cause major economic difficulties, but their hon. Friends say that there is no money, so how can too much money cause economic difficulties? Some Conservatives Members say that there is not enough money and we should spend more. Depending on which radio interviews one listened to, they have probably spent another couple of hundred billion pounds in their responses since my right hon. Friend the Chancellor sat down on Tuesday. So there is no money at all, just smoke and mirrors, but the smoke and mirrors are being spent and causing inflation. How does one spend smoke and mirrors?

Opposition Members say that we are spending too much on welfare, but they never tell us which aspect of welfare spending they would cut—child benefit, pensions or disability benefits. We get no answers.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: No, time is short, so I shall not. If the hon. Gentleman wants to tell me later what he was going to say, I will have a cup of tea with him.

At Prime Minister's Question Time, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) could not answer—which is not unusual—when asked what cuts he would make in welfare spending.

I know that the people of Harrow, East will be listening carefully to Opposition Members. The 21 per cent. of my constituents who are on income support will be listening, but they will hear no answers. The 16 per cent. who are over retirement age will have heard nothing from the Conservatives about pensions today, yesterday or the day before. The 23 per cent. of households in my constituency that are pensioner only—a very high figure—will not have heard the Conservatives welcome a single aspect of the review.

The 21,000 people in my constituency who have a limiting long-term illness—also a significantly high figure—will benefit from our spending on health, social services and pensions, but Opposition Members have offered them nothing. What does the Conservatives' response to the comprehensive spending review offer the 22,000 carers, the 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers and the 37 per cent. ethnic minority population in my constituency? Their only response was to raise vacuity and fatuousness to an art form, not only in stereo but in triplicate or quadruple—

Mr. Leslie: It was quadrophonic.

Mr. McNulty: I thank my hon. Friend. "Quadrophenia"—I should have remembered that.

The people of my constituency will welcome the comprehensive spending review and how it fits in with earlier pronouncements. The people of London will welcome the statement. The streets of London are not paved with gold and it is not all milk and honey. Members on both sides of the House have implied that London has had it far too good and been cosseted recently. According to the 1998 index of social deprivation, 14 of London's boroughs are in the 20 most poverty-stricken local authorities. They will benefit considerably from the comprehensive spending review. London contains some of the richest and poorest areas of the country, but far too often Members forget about the poorest. Even Harrow, which is supposedly an affluent suburban borough, has its pockets of serious relative deprivation.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: No, I am afraid not. I have been wound up all night and now I am winding down.

I am convinced that London will receive its fair share from the comprehensive spending review and we shall see the spending and investment that both this great city and the country need. The comprehensive spending review will be a success precisely because it is rooted in modernisation and the reform of public services. It is grounded in caution, prudence and efficiency and underpinned by a sharp reality and a vision and strategy that Opposition Members cannot comprehend because they do not understand where we started from. Perhaps they will disavow that notion later.

Mr. Davey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I agree that many people believe that London has been feather-bedded in the past, and he is correct in saying that they are wrong. Will he comment on reports that, following the comprehensive spending review, the Government are examining the additional educational needs index and standard spending assessments? The reports suggest that London will lose £200 million from school spending. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning those reports and agreeing—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a mini-speech. That is quite sufficient.

Mr. McNulty: I was about to ask the hon. Gentleman to give way, but then I remembered where we were. That is another issue to discuss over a cup of tea afterwards, but I urge the hon. Gentleman not to believe all that he reads in the *Evening Standard*. I am afraid that I cannot take any more interventions, as I must wind down my remarks.

The Opposition simply do not understand our starting point. They do not understand what we are trying to do and they do not understand the desperate need for this comprehensive spending review. They do not understand those things because this is not about their spiv economy, with candyfloss short-term plans before each election, followed by singing in the bath with no regrets afterwards and hoping to struggle through to the next one.

The Opposition can listen for ever—they started to do that this week. They can be Billy Whizz on tour, but they will find that no one wants to speak to them. Happily, not least because of the comprehensive spending review, for Conservative Members yesterday beckons.

9.26 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) was as colourful, vehement and Harrovian as ever. I am sorry that he was disappointed by the speeches of Conservative Members, but I think that they will stand the test of time better even than his own.

My late noble father was the first Chief Secretary to the Treasury. When Harold Macmillan offered him the job, he made it clear that he wished to offer it to someone who had run a great spending Department before. John Boyd-Carpenter, who died in the past week, was the second Chief Secretary. That tradition was not maintained for the next 30 years until my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) had the great intelligence to suggest that Mr. William Waldegrave should become Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the closing period of the last Government.

I do not hold it against the incoming Government in 1964 or the incoming Government in 1997 that they did not follow the same procedure, because it was obviously not within their power to do so, but the tradition of control of public expenditure is continuous and has some eternal verities. In reverse alphabetical order, there was continuity between Plowden and Pliatsky. In the far-off days, when Charles James Fox was the Member of Parliament for my constituency, the poet William Blake—who was not of a Conservative disposition—was his constituent. Among the latter's literary works was the "Proverbs of Hell" and, among those proverbs, is the line:

"Prudence is a rich, ugly, old maid courted by Incapacity."

I am not wholly surprised that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has retired her from his retinue. I noted another line that is not far away in the same "Proverbs of Hell". It states:

"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

The sad thing about this Government is that they never needed to leave the palace of wisdom. They borrowed our policies, but they should have borrowed too from our philosophy: the past can inform and illuminate the present and the future.

In that context, I shall quote briefly from Lord Barnett's book about his time as Chief Secretary in the last Labour Government. Referring to 1974, he writes:

"We did not know at that time how often the forecasts would prove to be inaccurate. On this first occasion, the figures that proved to be disastrously wrong were company liquidity, which was vastly overstated, and the PSBR, where the margin of error turned out to be a colossal £4bn short of the real figure."

I remark parenthetically that that figure was in 1974 sterling.

"In both cases there can be little doubt that different decisions would have been reached had the forecasts been less wide of the mark."

When I entered the House, in March 1977, those on the Government Benches were still reeling from the effect of the cuts that the Chancellor had had to impose in 1976. I have a strong suspicion that, as a result of the announcements that have just been made, we shall in due course see the same reaction on the Government Benches this time.

Because the Chief Secretary again quoted the mantra about national debt in the 1990s, I conclude with a comparison between general Government net debt as a

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

percentage of gross domestic product in 1978–80 and 1995 in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. In only two of those countries was the debt ratio down between those years. One of those countries was the United Kingdom; the other was Japan, which is a special case because of the real assets in the Japanese social security arrangements. Those figures give the lie to the frequent quotations that the Chief Secretary gives us.

9.30 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I declare the interests recorded in the Register of Members' Interests.

The debate has been lop-sided. From the Labour Benches, a succession of speakers either ignored the condition of the economy or were complacent about it. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) had not even heard of the manufacturing recession. A series of speakers asked for more public spending than they were given on Tuesday. The hon. Members for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) each demanded yet more public expenditure than was allocated on Tuesday. Not one Labour Member showed any understanding of how that spending will be funded.

By contrast, in forming its judgment on the balance of the spending review, the House had the benefit of the advice and experience of three former Treasury Ministers from the Conservative Benches.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) condemned the spending total as "reckless", exposed the various fiddles on which it was constructed and asked the key question, "Who pays up if growth falters?" My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), with the additional authority of having served as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, pointed out that there was nothing new about the search for efficiency savings. He, too, asked an important question about public service agreements and the sanctions that would be available if they were broken. Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) gave us, from a filial stance, an historical perspective on the importance of that office.

During the past two days, it has become even clearer that the comprehensive spending review was not a serious review. It was not a root-and-branch examination of public spending. It was not the reordering of spending priorities that one would expect from a new Government, switching spending from one Department to another. In fact, the review was called off. This was an old-fashioned spending splurge—fiddles, fudges and a great deal of hope, the spraying around of extra billions, every Department turning out to be a winner.

Several of my hon. Friends mentioned one casualty of the spending review. We heard a little less of poor old Prudence. She had been paraded in public and pushed forward in every photo-opportunity. She had been sent out to escort the Chancellor on every trip down to the square mile. Now it is all over. These days, we read of high-profile romances being ended by fax. Well, poor old Prudence was dumped by press notice on Tuesday. Now she is just another ex. With her goes all the rest: the reserve, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk pointed out, is shrunken away in years 2 and 3; cash limits are now flexible again, as we see from page 116; repayment of debt, promised in March, is already forgotten by July; and there is no balanced Budget. The Government stated:

"By 2000, the Budget is forecast to be in balance."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1998; Vol. 308, c. 1099.]

Just three months later, that promise, too, is abandoned.

Even on the Government's own figures, not in the spending review but in the earlier economic and fiscal strategy report, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) well illustrated, the public sector net cash requirement is shown at upwards of £4 billion for every year after 2000. We are back to extra spending and old-fashioned borrowing, all held together by the fiddles, fudges and heroic assumptions that underline the document presented to us.

I begin with the fiddles. A number of my hon. Friends have pointed out the absurdity of classifying working families tax credit as tax forgone, rather than the benefit that it replaces. That is not a view endorsed by the Office for National Statistics; on the contrary, the ONS has contradicted the Government. It will allocate working families tax credit as a benefit in the national accounts.

The fiddled figures are all tucked away. At the back of the document, on page 107, we read:

"Accounting and other adjustments"

rising from £13.4 billion this year to £20 billion in 2001. "Accounting and other adjustments" is now the fourth-biggest spending line, higher even than the Department for Education and Employment, whose budget received such attention yesterday, and higher than the budget allocated to the Scottish Office. Perhaps it is to be a Department of State, all on its own. There is certainly a candidate to run it—the Paymaster General himself. If he can magic away £200,000 in remuneration, who knows?—with a little extra tuition, he may be able to magic away £20 billion of accounting adjustments.

All that comes from a Government who promised us openness and transparency. A rather excited press release on Budget day stated:

"For too long, economic policy-making has been conducted behind closed doors".

A few weeks after that, the permanent secretary resigned, allegedly because policy making was indeed being conducted behind closed doors—behind the closed doors of the Grosvenor House hotel by the Chancellor and his spin doctors.

So much for the fiddles. I shall deal with the assumptions on which so much of the spending review depends. It depends on efficiency gains, which are not yet delivered. The Government have made it all the more difficult to realise those gains, by abolishing the compulsory competitive tendering that we set in place across the public service.

The spending totals also depend on savings from fraud busting. We were much mocked by the Prime Minister for claims that there was £2 billion worth of fraud. We were told that that was an Alice in Wonderland figure. In March, the Government gave the figure of £4 billion. On Monday, by a happy coincidence, the day

before the spending review, the Minister for Welfare Reform totted up £7 billion of fraud, and none of it busted yet.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk said, a large part of the Government's assumptions depends on asset sales not yet realised, with all the uncertainty of the commercial property market lying ahead. My right hon. Friend told us from his experience that asset sales usually take years.

Above all, the delivery of all the Government's extra spending depends on the savings from welfare reform to which they were originally committed. They said that they would cut the bills of social failure. Instead of cutting welfare spending, they have increased it. They have funked the radical reform that they promised. They have fudged the firm controls on its growth. They have postponed the reviews that they have in hand of housing benefit, the state pension and disability benefit. Above all, they are now gambling with all our futures. Every external commentator has now pointed out—this was done by the Chairman of the Treasury Select Committee in his question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer—that everything depends on the level of growth that the Treasury assumes. I shall quote just one external commentator, the leader writer of *The Independent*:

"How often before have we heard spurious claims that spending is to be financed out of growth? By tying the public finances to a three-year plan he is banking on today's economic prosperity lasting for at least another 36 months. Many sober judges argue that this is at best unlikely."

That is the verdict of *The Independent*.

When the Chancellor appeared before the Treasury Select Committee yesterday, he, too, had to admit that his figures do not take account of the recession. They do not take account of rising unemployment, and they will not take account of falling tax revenue.

We are faced with a huge gamble. For all the cheap applause now for the triple-counted figures bundled together into three-year totals to give us this billion pound bonanza, it is becoming clearer that sooner or later the Chancellor will have to borrow or he will have to tax.

The spending review has been a failure. It takes us back to old-fashioned Labour public spending. I shall answer the question that was put earlier. Of course we welcome any new money for schools and hospitals. If there is still confusion about this, let me put it even more explicitly. Genuine extra spending for schools: good. Genuine extra spending for hospitals: good. A three-year locked-in overall spending total: extremely reckless. There it is, clear as a bell.

By locking us in to three-year fixed totals without the savings or the reforms to finance them, the Government are putting at risk the future of the public services, by which they set so much store, and the future of the economy as a whole, on whose success those public services depend.

Mr. Miller: Let us just be clear. The hon. Gentleman is in favour of what I think is about £40 billion of expenditure, but he is not in favour of all the rest. What would he cut? Be straight, what would the hon. Gentleman cut?

Mr. Fallon: The hon. Gentleman's Government came into office pledged to cut welfare spending. We have pointed out tonight that any genuinely additional spending for schools and hospitals is thoroughly welcome. It is the overall spending total, locked in for three years without the savings and the reforms to fund it, that we think is endangering not only the economy but the future of those very public services that we support.

Mr. Leslie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fallon: I have sat down.

9.42 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): It is quite easy to understand now why the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) was sent by the electorate previously to spend more time with his family. We began with a declaration of interest by the hon. Gentleman, which tempted us to all to check his interests, one of which is a directorship of Just Learning Ltd. I think that it has been proved this evening that the only things that he is learning to read are the diary columns. The hon. Gentleman has not managed to get round to any independent economic analysis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) summed up what we have seen from the Opposition Benches this evening—vacuity. Opposition Members do not know whether they are coming or going. Even the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who I admit is a gentleman I admire because he is in the round in his activities in the House—and I am not talking about his avoirdupois; he is a true renaissance man of independent mind—began by saying that we were being reckless. Then he said that we were not spending enough.

Obviously, the shadow Chancellor has taken a leaf out of the book of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe. On the "Today" programme yesterday, the shadow Chancellor was asked whether he could have it both ways about whether we would be spending more or less. The only thing that he could say was that he could have it both ways. That is the man who is pretending that he knows how to run the country.

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) most displayed the complete lack of imagination and credibility of Conservative Members. They have had since Tuesday to work out their line on the comprehensive spending review and tell us what they would cut. They have not told us what they would cut.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I shall give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman in due course.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) gave the game away, because we discovered from him what Conservative Members would cut—pensions, child benefit and help for the disabled. From this day on until the next general election, we can point to Conservative Members and say that they are the ones who will cut pensions, cut help for the disabled and cut child benefit. We see the true, right-wing members of the Conservative party on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Clarke: Following the hon. Lady's kind remarks, I shall try to give an intervention in the round.

[Mr. Clarke]

I welcomed the spending on health and education, although I said that the total was too much, and I mentioned the working families tax credit, which I opposed when it was announced in the Budget. After the Budget, it turned out that the Government had underestimated its cost by £18 billion over this Parliament. Now they are tucking it away in the accounting adjustments to try to get rid of its cost. What kind of welfare reform brings in an innovation that costs far more than the Government intended and which has to be secreted away in the books?

Mrs. Liddell: What kind of former Chancellor cannot make his mind up about whether we are spending too much or too little? The working families tax credit is aimed at getting people from unemployment into work. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) says that I cannot listen. Conservative Members are supposed to be listening, but they did not listen on 1 May when the electorate said that they were a shoddy apology for a Government, who had betrayed the people of this country for 18 years.

Tonight, we have seen—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) says, "It's a disgrace." The disgrace is the performance of Conservative Members throughout the debate. Time after time, we asked, "What will you cut?" Time after time, we were told that that is not relevant to the debate. The people of this country want answers.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Economic Secretary give way?

Mrs. Liddell: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will explain how much he wants to cut from pensions, child benefit and the disabled.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Economic Secretary has totally misrepresented what I said, which was that I would control the social security budget better and that I would control the £7 billion of fraud that takes place—that is £150 for every man and woman in this country. What will she do about that?

Mrs. Liddell: We had 18 years of government by the Conservative party; to use an expression of my own Lanarkshire, "They couldn't run a menage." The right hon. Member for South Norfolk will understand what that means, coming from where he does. Conservative Members should be telling us where money could be better spent in the economy—they had 18 years to come to their conclusions.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), who seems to be suffering from short-term memory loss, talked about the mid-1970s and the International Monetary Fund. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) pointed out that he was two at that time. The short-term memory loss of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire causes him to forget what happened on black Wednesday, which showed how good Conservative Members were at running the economy.

In a pointed speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) referred to the failures of Conservative Members. One critical failure is their loss of short-term memory about their time in office: manufacturing output fell by more than 7 per cent., investment in the whole economy fell by 16 per cent., business investment fell by 20 per cent. and manufacturing investment fell by 27.7 per cent. Do they really want me to go on with their catalogue of failures?

Mr. Gibb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I am not prepared to give way any more.

We have heard many views from Opposition Members, and I shall deal with some of the remarks made by the other opposition parties. The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) recognised that the Labour Government are living up to the commitments we made during the general election. The comprehensive spending review has meant that we have delivered benefits that are three times greater than the Liberal Democrats were talking about at the general election. He cannot acknowledge that.

The hon. Gentleman went on to discuss the situation in Scotland, which is something in which he and I have a common interest. I seem to remember that, during the referendum campaign, the hon. Gentleman joined the Labour party in supporting the Barnett formula, but his arguments tonight were against the operation of that formula.

I should tell the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney), that the Barnett formula is not about cuts but about convergence. It is about the convergence of the economies of the less prosperous parts of the United Kingdom with the economies of more prosperous parts of the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Member for Wells said that the comprehensive spending review does nothing to improve the productive potential of the economy. The hon. Member for Cotswold condemned his own Government for their failure to act to increase productivity.

This Government are improving the productivity potential of the economy by investing in education, skills and infrastructure and by our strong belief in value for money. All those things will enhance the productive potential of the economy significantly. When Conservative Members were in government, they should have been doing that. If they had, our manufacturing industry would not be experiencing some of the difficulties it is experiencing now.

Another example of short-term memory loss concerns the fact that sterling had appreciated by 66 per cent. on 1 May last year—before the general election. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe is very quiet about that. The hon. Member for Cotswold said that we should have seen an increase in interest rates 18 months ago. Who was in government then? We know that it was the Conservatives.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I want to make some progress.

The right hon. Member for Wells accused us being inflationary in our tax and spend policies. How so? If we look at the current surplus figures and the debt-to-GDP

ratio for the next three years, and we consider net borrowing and the net cash requirement, we can see that they are all extremely prudent. Prudence has been much maligned tonight, but prudence can be found within the economic and fiscal stability report, which was published a month ago, and within the CSR.

A key aspect of the paucity of Opposition Members' arguments is that they have completely failed to address the real issues contained within the comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: In due course.

If the Opposition really cared about the operation of the UK economy, they would not be sitting whingeing as they have tonight, but would be entering into a constructive dialogue to see how the benefits that will accrue in health and education—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Gibb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: Will the hon. Gentleman shut up? He spent all his time in the Finance Bill Committee trying to find ways to ensure that £6 billion of revenue would be left out of the Exchequer. That money would go in tax cuts and would be taken away from the pensioners, the disabled and from child benefit.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) did some of his more interesting arithmetic gyrations. I commend to him page 116 of the CSR which will set out for him the difference between total managed expenditure and central Government expenditure. I will not take up time now going through something that the hon. Gentleman should have had time to read.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: No, I will not give way. I want to make some progress.

The right hon. Member for Wells talked about the Tories' golden economic legacy—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I am not giving way.

That golden legacy is fool's gold. They gave us boom and bust. The hon. Member for Chichester accused us of ignoring economic cycles. Our economic policy is designed to even out the worst impacts of those cycles on ordinary men and women who suffered because of the economic illiteracy of the Conservatives during their 18 years in government. We inherited a history of excessive Government borrowing and rising public debt. Public investment was neglected. The true benefits to the economy will flow from investment not just in our infrastructure but in our people.

The Conservatives say that they are a listening party, but they cannot listen. They are afraid that, if they listen, some of the errors of their ways may come back to them. They should have invested in Britain's infrastructure and in its people. The Labour Government will do that. I shall now deal with the ratio of GDP to debt.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Liddell: No. I do not intend to give way again.

Mr. Maude: We want constructive dialogue.

Mrs. Liddell: The right hon. Gentleman has not been here for much of the debate. All he can do is shout from the sidelines rather than contribute.

The hon. Member for Gordon spoke about monetary policy and inflation. He, of all people, should recognise the reason for our changes to the Bank of England. Some of his hon. Friends recognised the wisdom of those changes to ensure achievable inflation targets and a consistent monetary policy. How many times did the previous Government manage to achieve their targets? We have been in government for 14 months. The Conservatives were in government for 18 years and their governance was a saga of missed targets.

During debates on the Finance Bill, the hon. Member for Gordon and his hon. Friends proposed amendments that would have led to an 8p increase in income tax. That would have been ludicrous. He claims that there was no consultation on the comprehensive spending review. The parameters under which it was conducted were announced by the Government, and there was adequate opportunity for him to make known his views. He asked how we chose our priorities. The people elected us on specific manifesto pledges and Tuesday's historic statement means that, for the first time in 18 years, Britain has a Government who live up to their manifesto pledges.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Liddell: No. I am running out of time and there are other points to which I would like to respond.

The right hon. Member for Wells complained about welfare spending, again revealing that that is what the Conservatives would cut. We are cutting the impact of economic failure, thus freeing the money that will allow us to give a decent living to our pensioners, pay decent child benefit and provide decent help for the disabled. The Opposition know little about that.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe spoke about the net cash requirement and how it differed from that of the previous Government. They called it the public sector borrowing requirement. In 1992–93, it was 6 per cent. of GDP; in 1993–94, it was 7 per cent.; and in 1994–95, it was 5 per cent. Under this Government it will be 0.4, 0.4, 0.3, 0.5 and 0.5 per cent.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk spoke about public service recruitment and retention. That is rich from an Opposition Member. Does it not occur to the Opposition that the fact that they made public sector workers pariahs had some impact on public sector morale? We will not take any lectures from them about public sector pay. The right hon. Member for Wells had the audacity to complain about the level of public sector pay, although his Government were responsible for it, and

[Mrs. Liddell]

in the next breath he attacked the national minimum wage. The Opposition do not know whether they are coming or going.

Mr. Leslie: Is my hon. Friend aware of the example set by the shadow Chancellor as a director of Gartmore shared equity trust? This year, he awarded himself on the board a pay rise of 13.3 per cent. in one year.

Mrs. Liddell: There is no answer to that. I think that that reveals the hypocrisy of Conservative Members.

Mr. Swinney: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: I am sorry. I have less than a minute left, but I will turn to the point that the hon. Gentleman made. He criticised the settlement for Scotland. That settlement will deliver outputs that are three times better than his party offered in its manifesto.

Mr. Swinney *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I do not have time to give way. This is the hon. Gentleman who believes that economic policy should be based on crossing one's fingers and hoping for the best.

I commend the comprehensive spending review to the House.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.

Community Hospitals (Powys)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

10 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): It is my privilege to introduce this Adjournment debate. I am grateful to be given the time to look at the future of community hospitals in Powys.

This debate focuses on Powys. In the past 10 years, it has lost its health authority, its ambulance service and its fire service, and now there is the final nail in the coffin: a proposal for Powys to lose its health care trust. That is totally unacceptable to the people of Powys.

Powys occupies a quarter of Wales. The people of Powys believe that the fact that it has 10 community hospitals and 18 general practitioner practices within its boundaries gives it a comprehensive service in the NHS. I advise the House to remember that Powys is 130 miles in length. If one visited all 10 community hospitals, one could clock up in excess of 300 miles in a car.

Powys is a vast, sparsely populated area. The only other area with which it can be compared for sparsity is the highlands of Scotland. There is only one town in Powys—Newtown—with a population in excess of 10,000 people. Half the population live in the countryside. Those facts dictate why there is no district general hospital in Powys.

The strategy of the present Powys Health Care NHS trust and its predecessors has been to develop a successful network of community hospitals. Those hospitals now carry out about 40 per cent. of all patient operations, mainly through GPs. They provide a superb service and, because of that, attract intense loyalty from people in local communities.

Each hospital has an active league of friends: two in my constituency have raised £500,000 and £750,000 respectively in the past 10 years for capital projects to expand their hospital services. Local communities feel that they have ownership of those hospitals, and rightly so. That is demonstrated by the creation of Powys Action for Patients, which represents GPs, community health councils, nurses and communities in Powys in the fight to maintain our NHS trust in Powys.

I am sure that the Minister will remember recently opening Ystradgynlais community hospital's celebration of 50 years of the NHS a week ago last Saturday. I was there in the afternoon later on, and I know that he enjoyed himself. The hospital is the pride of local people. It is an excellent example of a modern community hospital.

Acute services in Powys are provided by 12 district general hospitals outside the county, with patients going to the nearest DGH. Services are delivered from many contrasting points—for example, Shrewsbury in the north-east and Swansea in the south-west. Only 8 per cent. of Powys patients travel to the district general hospital at Aberystwyth, while 92 per cent. are treated elsewhere. Patient referral patterns are widespread indeed. Frequently, patients have to travel 45 miles by ambulance—a 90-mile round trip—to get to a district general hospital. That happened to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) when he had his recent accident.

Mental health care is delivered from within Powys by the current Powys national health service trust. Mental health services are not, for example, delivered within Ceredigion, but accessed via the Pembrokeshire and Derwen NHS trust, outside that new county.

A major paradox in the planning of health care is provided by the present state of community hospitals. At a time when their value is increasingly recognised by central planners in the Department of Health and the national health service executive, there are more threats to their role and existence than at any time in the past 50 years of the existence of the NHS. Thirty five out of the 350 community hospitals in England and Wales are under threat of closure. By contrast, in Scotland, the status of the 70 similar hospitals is relatively protected by the Scottish Office.

All threats are on financial rather than clinical grounds, as less conscientious authorities and trusts attempt to balance their budgets by withdrawing services. In no case that has been critically appraised will savings ultimately result, as the cost of re-provision of services at a distance from the community is invariably higher, and issues of quality, including access in time and place, are habitually ignored. The tensions inherent in sharing a limited health care budget are responsible for that.

The view that community hospitals are expensive to run and under-utilised, which is frequently aired by detractors who want to devote increased resources to district, general or regional hospitals, must be questioned. The demands for high-tech care of all forms, with inevitable centralisation of services, must be met on the clear understanding that that represents only a minority of in-patient care, and that it is a mistake to admit any patient to a level of hospital care that is higher than necessary. Indeed, one can envisage a situation in which in Powys, with its 12 adjacent DGHs, telemedicine might come into its own and more patients could be treated in community hospitals in the future.

Why does the Welsh Office want to reorganise health care in Powys? Why sideline the Welsh assembly before it has a chance to contribute to the debate? We are told that the status quo is not a runner, but Powys rejected the model of a combined single district general hospital and community hospital service 10 years ago. The adopted strategy, rightly, was to develop the network of community hospitals and upgrade the services available, which made a great deal of sense with such a sparse population—it was the most appropriate type of development.

The proposal for amalgamation with Ceredigion in the reconfiguration exercise is intended to save money, not to save lives. It is driven by Welsh Office civil servants and by managers in the Dyfed Powys health authority, who want solutions that are just that much too neat. Clearly, Mr. Peter Gregory, the senior health civil servant in the Welsh Office and Mr. Peter Stansbie, the chief executive of Dyfed Powys health authority, have their own agenda of imposing models of health care that are totally inappropriate for the extreme rurality of Powys. The outcome will be patient disadvantage. Rural Wales does not lend itself to the DGH-type model, which is too simplistic and far too expensive for our area. The existence of 10 community hospitals in Powys proves that. Hospital beds in those community hospitals cost £115 per night, compared with £250 in a DGH.

The Under–Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), has told us that he wants to reduce the number of quangos. I understand that, but why does he not abolish the health authorities in Wales and have only one? That would save a lot of money—£4.5 million per annum by axing Dyfed Powys health authority for a start.

The people of Powys were outraged when they realised that the Powys and Ceredigion project team had a budget of £40,000 to promote the proposed amalgamation. That is taxpayers' money, whereas Powys Action for Patients has had to collect £15,000 of Powys people's own money to fight against the amalgamation with Ceredigion. Even the proposed name of the amalgamated trust—Canolbarth Cymru—will not be understood in many parts of Powys, which I regret: for example, only 2 per cent. of the population of Radnorshire speak and understand Welsh.

The experiment was put in motion because of the cumulative deficit compounded by the Ceredigion trust, which amounted to more than £1 million. The cumulative deficit in Powys was originally only about £50,000. The health authority financial projections in the document "Effective Care and Healthy People" showed that, if the two trusts were run separately, the annual deficit for Ceredigion would be £1.23 million in 2003, whereas that for Powys would be £420,000, which would be written off in six years. The plan to force Powys to amalgamate with Ceredigion would result in a total mismatch of functions. Moreover, the finances would not add up.

Conditions in rural areas are not conducive to such a model. There is no duplication of services and no competition between services—certainly not between Bronglais district general hospital and our 10 community hospitals. A city dogma is being applied to the countryside. The Welsh Office has a mindset that the urban model of health care applies to the whole of Wales, no matter how rural an area. Conditions in the M4 corridor and the valleys are very different from those in rural Powys.

The Welsh Office estimates that annual management savings from each trust merger will be £500,000 a year and that the cost of the merger will be equivalent to approximately two years' savings, or £1 million per merger. Those figures are a bit too convenient and need to be challenged. In the first draft of its merger document, the Ceredigion-Powys project board estimated a reorganisation cost of £2.79 million. Lo and behold, in the final draft, after Welsh Office persuasion, that figure had been massaged down to £1.2 million, so as to fit in with two years of savings at £500,000 a year.

We believe that those figures have been cooked. They are all guesstimates which have been plucked from the air. What about redundancy costs, for example? I know someone whom it would cost £300,000 to make redundant, but many others would attract redundancy costs. In Powys, redundancy costs alone could be more than £1 million. Those costs apply across Wales, where the trusts are of wildly different sizes and natures. It is projected that the 26 trusts will be reduced to 15. Does the Minister really believe that he will save £10 million by that exercise? I think not.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

The costs of integrating IT systems between Dyfed and Powys would be enormous—two completely different computer systems would have to be married. Imagine the costs of employing one IT consultant to straighten that out. Studies in the USA have shown that savings from health mergers are usually only a seventh of what was estimated, so if the reorganisation costs £2.79 million and the savings are only £70,000 per annum, the new trust will be in for a shock and services will need to be reduced. We should also take into account the massive deficit that it is estimated the new merged trust would have.

The major reasons for opposing a trust merger in a rural area are that it would do no good and save no money—it would not solve any problems; indeed, it would bring its own. All that we need is a reorganisation and more local management. Health care in Powys would improve far more if the Minister said—as I am sure he did in Ystradgynlais—how proud he was of our community hospitals. A merger will not solve the problems of Bronglais hospital. I have a great deal of sympathy with the situation in Ceredigion, where I lived for 14 years—my youngest son was born in Bronglais hospital and I have many friends there. However, the two trusts do not match up.

All the pointers are that, if the merger goes ahead, at least three community hospitals in Powys will have to close. That is clearly shown in the Dyfed Powys health authority document "Effective Care and Healthy People", published this spring.

The document says that groups of hospitals are viable, but does not say which ones will close. Brecon is twinned with Bronglais, and Welshpool with Newton and Llanidloes, suggesting that some will have to close. We believe that that is a disaster course and that the situation in Powys is, indeed, perilous. We stand to lose an enormous amount.

A merger of the Powys and Ceredigion trusts is a mismatch of serious proportions. Transitional costs are likely to be high, the district general hospital model is not appropriate and Powys delivers mental health services, which Ceredigion does not.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that the people of Powys are united against any prospect of a merger and that hospitals such as Llanidloes, which helped to save my life, are under a serious threat that has not been democratically sanctioned?

Mr. Livsey: Indeed, I agree completely. The merger is opposed by all GPs in Powys—that is, all the 151 British Medical Association members; all the consultants who treat Powys patients; Powys county council, which wants to co-operate further with the NHS through social services; both community health councils, in Montgomery and in Brecon and Radnor; both Members of Parliament; all nurses; and all trade union members in the NHS in Powys.

The Minister has a straight choice: allow the community hospitals in Powys to collapse, or use this opportunity—I hope that we are convincing him tonight—to build a superb NHS service, based on primary care and locality groups. That would be the ideal clinical model for Powys, the most remote and sparsely populated area in England and Wales.

10.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) on securing this debate. I thank him for giving me the opportunity to consider some of the issues that he has raised.

Community hospitals have for 100 years or so played an important role in all our communities. Over the years, their place in the national health service and their relationship to the larger and more specialised district general hospitals have fluctuated, but there is now a wide acceptance that such hospitals, and other related local facilities, can provide an important complementary range of services.

Traditionally, the care provided in community hospitals is intermediate between care at home and that requiring specialist resources in large acute hospitals. They relieve pressure on acute hospitals by admitting and treating patients who otherwise would have to be admitted to general hospitals, by allowing the early discharge for rehabilitation and recovery of patients not yet ready for home care, and by providing respite and rehabilitation in a planned way.

Within that broad understanding of the services that may be appropriate in community settings, a number are particularly important: out-patient clinics with specialist clinicians, to avoid patients having to travel long distances; in-patient beds with care provided by local doctors, specialist doctors and nurses; minor injury services provided by local general practitioners with access to a wider range of facilities and support services than are available in surgeries; and, in some places, maternity services provided by local doctors and midwives.

In all those services, a balance needs to be struck between the convenience, practicality and efficiency of having them available locally, and the economy and clinical security of concentrating them in larger centres.

Community hospitals can also act as a resource and a focus for wider health activity in the area. The hon. Member rightly praised the work of hospital leagues of friends, which can coalesce around a hospital and help to improve not only the hospital service but the community spirit of an area. Community hospitals can provide a base for out-of-hours GP services; be the home of community mental health and learning disability teams; be a base for the provision of therapy services and community dental health services; and the list goes on impressively.

It is for health authorities, working with NHS trusts, local primary care professionals, local government and other interested local agencies and groups to decide what range of facilities is appropriate locally, and how they should be run. Yes, I very much enjoyed my visit to the Ystradgynlais community hospital and I am impressed by the service provided there. I have not forgotten that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the provision in Powys and the need for a range of facilities and services that reflect its particular character. Community hospitals and other related health facilities have a distinctive role to play, but we need to make sure, too, that they reflect

healthcare provision for the 21st century, are in the right places, are the right size, and provide the right range of health and other services.

Dyfed Powys health authority is responsible for assessing the health needs of the people of Powys and, in consultation with its partner agencies and local people, for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of the people in Powys. In future, much of that responsibility will pass to the Powys local health group, which is being introduced following the publication of the White Paper "Putting Patients First", with the Dyfed Powys health authority providing a strategic overview and ensuring that services are matched to need and available resources, and reflect best clinical and operational practice.

Yes, it is true that, under the trust reconfiguration, the Powys healthcare trust may disappear, but Powys will gain a local health group which will have a far greater say in the provision of services in Powys than has ever happened before. It is important to bear that in mind. There will be far greater local management. Local GPs, the local Powys county council, local voluntary groups connected with the health service and other primary health-care professionals will make the decisions about commissioning healthcare in Powys. They will decide where the community hospitals will be.

Let us make it absolutely clear right now: there is nothing in the trust reconfiguration process which will affect the services provided by community hospitals in Powys.

Mr. Livsey: I understand what the Minister says. Our proposals, which are new proposals for Powys with a primary care, clinically led trust, are similar to his. The main thing is that the authority covers the whole of Powys, has a budget, and can make decisions strategically. The damage of taking that away will cause the closure of our community hospitals.

Mr. Griffiths: It will not, because the local health group, starting as a sub-committee of the health authority, will nevertheless have its own budget and be able to make its own commissioning decisions. That needs to be made absolutely clear. A problem with this debate is that people think that the new NHS trusts will be exactly the same as the old ones. They will be quite different.

I turn now to the Dyfed Powys plan for making recovery from the deficit which exists within the Dyfed Powys area. That is both a health authority and an NHS trust responsibility. Today, there was a meeting at which the partners with the Welsh Office agreed on a way forward and on measures to achieve a break-even point.

There was a stab at the strategy outlined in "Effective Care and Healthy People", but it was rejected by people in Dyfed Powys. In the light of those comments, the Dyfed Powys health authority revised its strategy. A new document is now available. It commits the health authority to a joint review with the Powys NHS trust of community hospitals in Powys. It is important that this review goes ahead quickly, is robust, and reaches conclusions which will allow services in Dyfed Powys to be developed in ways that will stand the test of time.

My Department has taken a close interest in the authority's planning. I met the former chair of the health authority last month to discuss the position. My officials held meetings today, and I am sure that between us we will tackle the problem successfully. However, I cannot comment on particular aspects of the Dyfed Powys strategy, because, if there are disputes to be resolved within Dyfed Powys, they will come to the Welsh Office, to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, for decision.

However, I am absolutely confident that the community hospitals in Powys are more likely to be strengthened by the reconfiguration of the trust, because it will make more money available directly for patient care, and the local health group in Powys—the doctors, the primary care professionals, the local voluntary groups, local government and Powys county council—will be at the heart of the decision-making and commissioning. The new NHS will give Powys a far better deal than it has ever had before.

Mr. Öpik: Is the Minister aware that, for all the promises of extra money made for health in Wales this week, unless he resists what we regard as a potentially expedient bringing together of Powys with Ceredigion, that extra money is not worth the promises made in the Chamber? Within that, will he reaffirm the promise made by the Secretary of State for Wales when he was the shadow Secretary of State, that he would resist the closure of any community hospitals if that was proposed in Powys?

Mr. Griffiths: I make it quite clear that this year already we have provided about £140 million extra for the health service in Wales. Dyfed Powys health authority has £3 million of the £20 million to tackle the waiting list problem. We are investing more money in the health service in Wales.

Yes, we recognise that not sufficient was invested in the past, and that there are some historical problems to be dealt with. But my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's public expenditure announcement gives us another £175 million next year on top of what we had this year, the following year the accumulated extra will be £345 million, and in the third year the accumulated extra will be £510 million. All told, during the three years, more than £1 billion extra will go into the health service. Dyfed Powys health authority and the Powys local health group will get their fair share of that money to develop services within the area.

It is clear that the Dyfed Powys health authority strategy will enable community hospitals to prosper where they provide an effective local service. From what I know of the Powys area, most fall into that category. I am sure that the local doctors, the primary care professionals, who want to strengthen the role of community hospitals, will be given the capacity to do so by the local health groups. There is no problem there. As we provide more money for the health service, more money will go to Dyfed Powys.

Mr. Öpik: I am sorry to press the Minister on this point, but will he give us an assurance that he will honour the pre-election promise by the then shadow Secretary of State for Wales, now the Secretary of State, that he would resist the closure of community hospitals if they were proposed in Powys?

Mr. Griffiths: That is impossible, because in Dyfed Powys, the closure of Tenby cottage hospital has already been agreed with the community. The facilities available in Tenby will be provided in another way in the town. I understand that everyone is happy for that to happen. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the Secretary of State should have stepped in and told people in Tenby that that hospital could not be closed because of a promise made before the election, that is ludicrous.

Let us get down to the serious issue of ensuring that we provide a high-quality health service throughout Wales. That has nothing to do with what the head of the Welsh Office health division or the chief executive of the Dyfed Powys health authority wants; it is all about what the Labour party promised before the election. It said then that it would rationalise the trusts in Wales to save money. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire mentioned £10 million, but in fact it will be between £7 million and £10 million. I would not plump on £10 million exactly, but more than £7 million of savings will go directly into patient care, and will help to keep hospitals open in the Dyfed Powys area.

I also want to make it explicit that doctors in Powys will be able to send their patients to the appropriate district general hospitals outside their area where they consider that their patients can attain the best treatment. That is critical, because doctors will have far more say than they ever had before. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire has not taken up the offer made by the chair of the local project group for the trust reconfiguration to meet Powys Action for Patients.

Mr. Livsey: I intend to do that, but it has not been possible to do so yet.

Mr. Griffiths: I am pleased that that will happen, because I know that so far she has heard nothing.

On behalf of the Welsh Office, I give an absolute commitment that community hospitals which provide an effective service in Dyfed Powys will continue to do so, and that the trust reconfiguration exercise will make that more rather than less likely.

The motion having been made at Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 17 July 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NATO Enlargement

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We are debating three protocols relating to the North Atlantic treaty. The protocols have been tabled. They are Command Papers and are available to the House, but the explanatory memoranda are not available in the Vote Office. May I suggest that, in our quest for ways in which to modernise this place, we might think again about the Ponsonby rule, under which treaties, conventions and protocols are ratified in the House? We are lucky to get a debate on the enlargement of NATO. As the House is considering how it administers its proceedings, the Ponsonby rule might fruitfully be reviewed.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. It seems to me that the Modernisation Committee could look at that. I shall see that the relevant section of the *Official Report* is given to the Modernisation Committee.

9.35 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): For almost half of this century, Europe has been divided between east and west. That division would have been incomprehensible to previous generations. For the preceding two centuries, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague and Budapest were part of a common European heritage expressed in shared culture, music and architecture. Their separation from the rest of Europe after the war was brutal, and was enforced with frequent brutality.

The restoration of those capitals and their countries to our common European heritage has been the most exciting change in political geography of our generation. It began a decade ago in Berlin with the destruction of the wall that symbolised the iron curtain. It will continue for another decade, as we continue the process of enlargement of the European Union to embrace the new democracies of central and eastern Europe. Countries that have emerged from former communist rule to share our democracy and our freedom of speech must also be given every opportunity to share in our prosperity. We cannot allow the iron curtain between east and west to be replaced by a velvet curtain, dividing the haves from the have-nots.

Today's debate is another step in rolling back the division that has scarred Europe for too long. Just as enlargement of the European Union will enable the people of central Europe to share in our prosperity, so the enlargement of NATO will enable them to share in our security. It is a mark of the momentous change in our continent that three countries that, only a decade ago, were among our potential enemies will, from now on, be among our firm allies.

That step is in the interests of the new member states, but it is also in the interests of the existing states. We, too, have everything to gain from increased security in central Europe. The division of Europe has lasted since a war that began with the invasion of the Czech lands and of Poland. Today, we put such conflict between us firmly into the history books by bringing those countries into a common military alliance based on the principle of mutual defence.

NATO has been the foundation stone of Britain's security for 50 years. As the iron curtain parted, there were those who claimed that NATO would become redundant. Some still say that, with the Soviet Union dead and buried, NATO has done its job and should be given an honourable discharge, but, 10 years after the cold war, NATO has a new role. We have learnt that there is a continuing need for a military organisation of NATO's competence and strength. We have learnt that NATO is still essential to maintaining peace and stability. NATO's role now is not solely one of the territorial defence of its members against any external military threat. The mission most often undertaken by NATO forces is to act as the instrument of regional security by building peace rather than deterring war.

In Bosnia, we saw war wreak its misery once again in our continent. NATO played the key part in bringing that war to an end, and is playing an equally key part in building the peace. Without NATO's resolve, the brutal repression in Kosovo in early June would have remained unchecked. It is NATO which is providing comfort and solidarity to the neighbouring countries of Albania and Macedonia by high-profile military visits and exercises. Therefore, there is a clear, continuing role for NATO, facing up to new threats to security and stability.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On NATO's role in southern Europe, will my right hon. Friend reflect on whether there is a case for expanding the work of the United Nations, giving it the capability it needs to ensure that ceasefires are observed and peace is upheld, rather than handing matters to a military alliance which is not answerable to the UN?

Mr. Cook: The United Nations remains at the centre of the Government's policy in creating a strong, healthy and peaceful international community. Indeed, over the past year, we have ensured that key decisions on peacekeeping and conflict prevention are taken to the UN. Also, we have made proposals in the strategic defence review for ensuring that Britain is ready to respond to calls by the UN on our forces in order to meet challenges to peace around the world. Senior UN figures are of course adamant—as we are—that the UN must be the body which provides the mandate and the international community's response to threats, but, by its culture and nature, it is not a military organisation, and is not well placed to provide command and control of military

[Mr. Cook]

operations. That is why the UN's recent history in peacekeeping operations has been to use military regional organisations to respond to its mandate and requirements. NATO must be able to respond to such UN calls when they are made.

This Government can speak with some authority on NATO because, of course, a Labour Government negotiated the North Atlantic treaty. Britain has remained one of NATO's major allies and contributors ever since. NATO has served our country well; it has given us security against external threat, confidence in our relations with European partners and the means by which to police the security of our region. NATO is also the most powerful pillar of the partnership between Europe and the United States.

We who owe so much to the alliance must now be generous in admitting as members the central European countries on our borders. As the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) mentioned on a point of order, that is achieved by three protocols—one for each of the three countries. Incidentally, I have made inquiries; the explanatory memoranda will be in the Vote Office as soon as they can be copied this morning.

There are three fundamental components to NATO's effectiveness: collective defence, armed forces that can work together and a commitment to common values. We believe that each will be strengthened by admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic as new members.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The *New York Times* reports that a majority opinion in Czechoslovakia is against joining NATO. Having said all that about NATO's advantages, what is my right hon. Friend's assessment of the effect of NATO expansion on nationalist forces in the Soviet Union, which do not love democracy and which might exploit for their own purposes such expansion to their borders—especially the Baltic states?

Mr. Cook: It is not for the House to decide the state of Czech opinion. That is a matter for those who are elected to represent Czech opinion; they are unanimous in their wish to accede to membership of NATO. The one occasion on which public opinion in any of the three lands was tested was in Hungary, where a referendum organised by the Hungarian Government produced a thumping majority in favour of membership. We NATO members must recognise and accept the advice of those who represent the three countries that it is the settled view that they wish to share the security that NATO membership confers.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Robin Cook: I have not yet finished answering the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), but I shall happily take another one on board.

Mr. Frank Cook: I apologise to the Foreign Secretary; I thought that he had finished the point. Will he reflect on the public opinion that used to be registered in Spain and the way in which the Spanish view has changed considerably?

Mr. Robin Cook: Spain is now so comfortable and at home with the alliance that the alliance's Secretary-General is a former distinguished Spanish Minister.

It may be appropriate to respond to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow, who anticipated part of my speech, by making the following points. We have always maintained that Russian concerns were misplaced. NATO is a defensive alliance; its primary duty remains the defence of its member states against aggression from any quarter. Its most urgent work at present is securing stability in parts of Europe where there is instability, such as the western Balkans. It is in Russia's interest that NATO should be able to restore stability in such regions of common interest. Indeed, Russia has worked with NATO to secure that objective in Bosnia. I accept my hon. Friend's point that Russia's concerns about NATO remain, although we have established valuable dialogue with Russia on wider issues.

On the eve of the Madrid summit on enlargement of NATO, all members of the alliance signed the NATO-Russia founding Act, which has established a new relationship based on co-operation not confrontation. The founding Act provides for a permanent joint council between us. I have attended ministerial meetings of that council, which have been extremely productive and conducted in a friendly spirit. The permanent joint council has a wide agenda, covering a variety of common interests from assistance with economic and employment consequences of defence reduction to greater transparency of force levels and capability. A year on from the summit, I find it welcome that we can talk constructively with Russia about issues of common interest without the matter of enlargement getting in the way of the dialogue.

I return to the issue of the three countries that are seeking to join us. I said that the principle of collective defence still lies at the heart of NATO. Article 5 of the Washington treaty makes an attack on one NATO member an attack on all. It is the strongest possible guarantee of our security, and sends the clearest possible message to anyone with designs on the territory or freedom of action of a NATO member. The three new members of NATO will enjoy that guarantee; they will accept, too, the responsibility that it imposes on them. We will help to defend Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic; they will help to defend us. The principle of collective defence will not be weakened by the expansion of NATO's numbers. On the contrary, the capability to deliver on that principle will be strengthened by the increase in numbers and the greater security of our present borders.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The Foreign Secretary has said that it is in all our interests to secure stability in the western Balkans. Might we not be able to enhance our security in that area by admitting Slovenia to NATO? The United States made clear its opposition to that at the Madrid summit. Does it remain United Kingdom policy that Slovenia should be admitted at an early opportunity? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that would enhance the stability of the western Balkans?

Mr. Cook: The case for Slovenia becoming a member of NATO stands on its own ground and does not require

to be approached tangentially by reference to the western Balkans. It is well known that, in the lead-up to the Madrid conference, Britain supported the case for admitting Slovenia.

Two main schools of thought emerged in discussions before and during Madrid. One was that there should be an enlargement by the admission of three countries, and that is the proposition that we are debating. It is manageable, and I shall later deal with why it is important not to have an unmanageable enlargement.

The second proposition was that there should be an enlargement by five countries to embrace both Slovenia and Romania. There was no support in the alliance for an enlargement of four. However, this will not be the last enlargement, and other countries, including Slovenia, have made applications which will continue to be considered on their merits.

I have said that, in debating enlargement, we must reflect on three considerations. The first is the maintenance of our collective defence; in our judgment, the enlargement will strengthen, not weaken, that. The second consideration must be the military effectiveness of the alliance.

The former communist countries have had to face a series of daunting tasks. They have had to re-create democratic institutions, restore individual freedoms and restructure and modernise their economies. They have also had to address the need to reform their armies as modern military forces that are accountable to civilian rule. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have all approached that challenge with determination and energy.

Through NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme, we have provided training, advice and joint exercises. Britain has provided extensive programmes of education in the English language, which is a key part of integration into NATO in which English is the common language of command. Britain has also sponsored seminars in the new member states on subjects such as air traffic control, the role of the junior ranks and military law. We have first-hand knowledge of the competent and disciplined character of their armed forces from working alongside them in Bosnia. Armies that once exercised in readiness for war against each other now work together to impose a common peace.

Working alongside our forces in Bosnia is a mechanised infantry battalion from the Czech Republic, another such battalion from Poland and an engineer battalion from Hungary. The contribution of those countries to the NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Bosnia demonstrates their commitment to fulfilling their obligations as allies.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): I am listening to my right hon. Friend with great interest. He places great credibility on the military input of the three new countries to NATO. I ask him to back-pedal a little on that proposition, because the contribution of those nations to the campaign in Bosnia is currently the total contribution that they will be able to make to NATO's future defence.

Will my right hon. Friend re-emphasise his earlier comment that we are not debating a military decision? It may have military significance in a decade, but the important aspect at present is the political decision to expand. Those three countries have given a commitment to increase defence expenditure. When that happens, they will be able to make a real military contribution, but that will be in perhaps five or 10 years' time, rather than at present.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes an interesting contribution. I do not go along with him in the limited character that he ascribes to the military forces of those three countries. They would be the first to recognise that they have further to travel. As one of the existing members of NATO, we are willing to help them to travel that road and to continue to work with them. We shall be able to do more with them as allies in the alliance than we can do while they are not. Of course, my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the powerful political character of the decision. His contribution leads me naturally to the third consideration in debating enlargement and whether those countries are ready to join NATO.

Mr. Colvin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall give way, but, at some stage, I must be allowed to make my speech.

Mr. Colvin: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that another key factor in those countries' eligibility for membership of NATO is the democratisation of their armed forces so that they are under civilian, political control rather than military control?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman takes me to my third consideration, which is about how we assess those countries.

NATO's fundamental strength is not its military capability: it is the common values of the alliance countries. The strength of the alliance derives from our respect for democracy and human rights, individual liberty and the rule of law. The Washington treaty reaffirms the faith of NATO members in the United Nations charter and their wish to live in peace with all peoples and all Governments.

Ernest Bevin, the first Labour Foreign Secretary after the war, laid that treaty before the House. He said that it was

"an endeavour to express on paper the underlying determination to preserve our way of life—freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the rights and liberty of the individual."

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have shown that they share those values. Perhaps they treasure them even more than we do, because they had to struggle for their freedom and democracy and they know their worth. Perhaps that helps to explain the great enthusiasm within those countries for membership of NATO.

NATO is effective because all its members share common principles. That is why 16 countries can still be effective, even though every decision is by consensus. The same will be true of a NATO of 19 allies with shared principles. The enlargement by three countries that was agreed at Madrid still leaves on the table applications for membership by other countries. In an intervention, the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) drew attention to one such country.

Those countries are also seeking to address the modernisation of their armed forces, and we are playing an active part in assisting them through "Partnership for Peace". We are also in close political dialogue with them on security through the Euro-Atlantic partnership council.

[Mr. Cook]

It was no easy decision to choose which among so many applicant countries should be successful. The consensus that emerged from long discussion in Madrid was that they should be the three countries that we are debating. Critical to that judgment was the broad view that NATO enlargement should proceed at a pace that is consistent with NATO absorbing its expanded membership. We would do no service to the other countries that aspire to join NATO if we expanded so rapidly that NATO lost its effectiveness as the military guarantor of peace on our continent. As I have said, this will not be the last NATO enlargement. No one should be under any illusion about the magnitude of the current enlargement.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I hope that, when the Foreign Secretary amplifies his remarks, he will address the issue of Russia. Early in his speech, he said that the expansion of NATO was an export of security to central and eastern Europe. In view of the NATO-Russia founding Act, will the culmination of that process be Russian membership of NATO, or is that not the Government's view?

Mr. Cook: As was famously observed by a Prime Minister, "never" is one of the longest words in the English language. Nobody rules out any option for the future of NATO. At present, Russia has not applied to join NATO, and we are a long way from the time when that will be a credible proposition. However, we work hard for the success of the permanent joint council, and that is the basis of our current dialogue with Russia. In the same way, we are working with Ukraine through the charter that we have formed between it and NATO.

At present, NATO has not only a good relationship with applicant countries, but a strong relationship with many countries such as Russia and Ukraine which have not submitted an application to join, but who work with us through "Partnership for Peace". Many of those countries are participants in the Euro-Atlantic partnership council, which has met four times, and proved successful when it has done so. We particularly welcome the relations with Ukraine.

Although Ukraine and Russia may not be part of the enlargement, it is still a substantial enlargement. The admission of the three countries will increase the territory within NATO by a sixth, and will increase the borders of NATO by a third. The immediate priority must be to make a success of such a large expansion of the alliance by ensuring the integration of the new members into the command structure and the interoperability of their forces. The costs of doing so are modest, and well worth the price.

The UK may have to pay an estimated additional £110 million to NATO's common budgets; that will be spread over a decade. The costs to the new members might be higher, but they will not be excessive. It is a cost which, in large part, they would have had to undertake if they were to modernise their forces, whether or not they were members of NATO.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The figure of £110 million over 10 years is called into question in the Select Committee report. Has the Ministry of Defence examined the £110 million projection? If so, are the Government prepared to stand by it?

Mr. Cook: I assure the hon. Gentleman that any figure given by a Cabinet Minister to the House is one which the Government are prepared to stand by. There is a memorandum in the Library—hon. Members are welcome to consult it—which compares our estimates of the cost with those made by others.

Mr. Dalyell: Two years ago, *The New York Times* reported that the congressional budget office had estimated that the price tag might be as high as $125 billion over 15 years. The American estimates seem very different from the one that my right hon. Friend has given the House. Is he saying that the American estimates are baloney?

Mr. Cook: The agreed NATO costs, which embrace the Americans' support, is a total of $1.5 billion, of which the UK share is the £110 million to which I have referred. I invite my hon. Friend to consult the papers in the Library, which go into some detail about why we believe in the figures and why we believe that other estimates are exaggerated.

I have explained the costs to the House, and I welcome the interest of hon. Members in making sure that it is convinced of the figures. However, it is broadly agreed that the cost of enlargement will not be great, to either existing or new members. I hope that the House will agree, without the necessity to consult the Library, that the rewards of a successful enlargement will be great for both existing and new members.

The reward is a NATO that unites, rather than divides, our continent. Enlargement of NATO is a logical response to the end of the cold war and the collapse of the iron curtain. I therefore hope that the whole House will join today in offering a warm welcome to our new partners in the Atlantic alliance.

10.2 am

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I agree with much of what the Foreign Secretary said, but I am slightly more cautious than he is. He made a diplomat's speech, but there are military considerations in the further expansion of NATO which I wish to touch on in rather more detail than he did.

Before I go on, I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House, as I cannot stay to the end of the debate. I have already apologised to the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence. I also wish to say to the Chairman of the Defence Select Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), that, in preparing for the debate, I found the Committee's report extraordinarily valuable and comprehensive. We all owe him a debt of gratitude.

Like the Foreign Secretary, I wish to spend a moment on the background. NATO was formed as a defensive alliance nearly 50 years ago, in response to a clear military threat from the Soviet Union and its allies. It is worth reminding ourselves that it is and was a collective defence organisation with a commitment to mutual military defence. The Foreign Secretary referred to

article 5. That is a serious commitment for one state to make—that it will consider the invasion of another state or a threat to its territory as a threat to itself.

As a result of that commitment, we developed in NATO a highly integrated military command structure, and we committed troops and equipment in Germany to resist any attack. That was a commitment to the forward defence of the whole NATO area, and it has been an incredibly successful venture. By any standards, the result of the cold war has been victory for the west.

That victory poses problems and challenges about the identity and purpose of NATO, which we must address. The Madrid summit last year contained many items in its further programme of activity, but I wish to mentioned four: the admission of the three new states, on which the Foreign Secretary spent time and which we wholly support; NATO's commitment to an open-door policy; the enhancement of the programme for peace and the creation of the European-Atlantic partnership council; and the instruction that NATO staff should examine the strategic concept of NATO and come back to the conference next year to carry the discussion forward.

The purpose of NATO after the end of the cold war is the big question that ought to be addressed before we consider how far NATO's expansion might go. The old objective was substantial and involved the possibility of total war, including the use of nuclear weapons. Those threats have largely disappeared, and all member states of NATO have significantly reduced defence spending as a result.

The future role of NATO must be to defend the vital interests of NATO members. That extends from resisting external attack on NATO territory—improbable though that currently seems—to intervention in non-NATO regional disputes and to defending NATO interests outside the NATO area.

The immediate threat of a Russian attack has considerably diminished, but territorial threats remain, at least potentially—the poverty and Islamic fundamentalism of the Maghreb countries in north Africa; rogue states, such as Libya and Algeria, with biological and chemical weapons capability and, in some cases, the possibility of nuclear weapons; and potential instability in Russia, Ukraine and other countries in the region.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned nuclear weapons twice in the last few moments, and he emphasised earlier the importance of the security guarantee to be extended under article 5 to all members, including new members. That security guarantee includes, if necessary, the use of nuclear weapons, which tends to underline the solemnity of the guarantee and the extent to which we should appreciate what we are to extend.

Mr. Maples: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes his point very well, and I agree. We are extending our military umbrella, which includes the availability of nuclear weapons from the United States, France and ourselves, to the defence of those other countries. That throws into stark relief the extent of the commitment we are making.

Mr. Dalyell: How does the hon. Gentleman reply to the view of Dr. Arbatov that the Russians have admitted that the parlous condition of their conventional forces makes them more reliant on their nuclear weapons? Does not that have serious consequences for East-West tensions?

Mr. Maples: I wanted to look later at the problem from the Russians' point of view. It may be the fault of the lawyer in me that I like to look at things from the other side, but it is probably a virtue in a diplomat as well—to try to see things from a different point of view.

Mr. Corbyn: I thought the hon. Gentleman was a politician.

Mr. Maples: I am a lapsed lawyer, I am afraid.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there are many heavily armed states with modern weapons outside NATO—40 have modern aircraft, 20 have ballistic missiles, 12 have chemical and biological capability and some, as we know, are developing nuclear capability as well. Threats to our interests remain—for example, the instability and war in the former Yugoslavia, the possibility of a spillover into south-eastern Europe from middle east disputes, and the need to protect commercial interests, as we saw in the Gulf recently.

Such threats—which are unforeseen precisely because no one can predict what they will be—will arise. The possibility of a resurgent Russia may be remote, but we should take it seriously. When we consider the conflicts in which we have been involved over the past 16 or 17 years, we should remember that the Foreign Office did not predict the Falklands conflict or the Gulf war, so the chances that the next conflict will be predicted are remote.

An advantageous feature of NATO is that it has made war between its member states unthinkable. Without its military structure and the integrated military command, that may change, which would be a dangerous departure.

Mr. Corbyn: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the whole thrust of NATO expansion—right up to the borders of Russia and down through south-east Europe—may encourage increased militarism in the countries that it borders? The military in those countries will be encouraged to demand increased resources at the expense of an often very deprived population. Should we not demilitarise Europe rather than increase militarisation on its borders?

Mr. Maples: I shall deal later with how expansion appears, and what the consequences may be, in Russia and some of the other countries of the former Soviet Union. I do not agree that our response should be to demilitarise NATO; I have enumerated some of the threats that we may have to meet with military force.

We must decide what kind of NATO we want—do we want a hard NATO or a soft NATO? We clearly need it to have a crisis management, peacekeeping function, as has been shown over the past few years. As the Foreign Secretary said, we need to foster understanding and good relations with the countries of the former Warsaw pact and the former Soviet Union.

The three successful applicant countries—and, indeed, the other applicant countries—want to join NATO because of the territorial security guarantee. They do not

[Mr. Maples]

want to join it because they regard it as a nice western political club; they want the security guarantee that article 5 of the NATO treaty will give them.

It would be foolish to disband NATO's integrated military command structure, which gives it the capability to handle such military threats; if we did, we might have to put it together again at rather short notice. We should remember that, in the Gulf war, the NATO command structure enabled the British and the Americans to work closely together. Indeed, the French found it difficult to work with their allies; as a result, they played a somewhat peripheral role.

NATO keeps the United States committed to European defence and involved in any military operations, which I regard as vital. We should ask whether the United States would be involved in Bosnia if NATO did not have a hard military element and whether, without the United States, we would be involved in Bosnia. Europe has been reluctant to become involved in such disputes without the support of the United States—most of NATO's hard dimension depends on the United Kingdom and the United States.

NATO is not a political club; it is a military alliance. Membership is not a reward for good behaviour; it is about mutual military defence and the efficiency and rapidity of response. We are all aware of the letter that was sent to the Prime Minister in May by 23, I think, distinguished military and diplomatic figures, who referred to the

"vital need to preserve NATO's ability, in the new Europe where, by common consent, potential threats to the peace are diffuse and unpredictable, to make rapid decisions and take quick and effective decisions on what action, if any, to take."

We must ensure that NATO retains those characteristics.

Any new members must be defendable without huge extra expense or risks to the existing members, and they must make a real military contribution. We must ask some difficult questions. Are we prepared to go to war to defend their territory under article 5 of the NATO treaty? How practical would it be for NATO to defend the Baltic states? NATO obligations could lead to a general war in Europe. Are we prepared to allow that to happen for the sake of the defence of some of the applicant countries? We must consider the military commitments very carefully.

Mr. Gray: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend's point that, as NATO is only as good as its weakest link, we must be cautious about too rapid an expansion. The most recent expansion was in 1990, when east Germany became part of west Germany, so to speak; the Bundeswehr had fundamentally to restructure east German forces to integrate them into the west German army. Does he agree that we should be cautious about the time and money that will be required to restructure the armed forces of some of the new countries, so that they can play an active and useful part in NATO?

Mr. Maples: My hon. Friend is right. The United States Department of Defence estimates that the restructuring and development of the armed forces of the three successful applicant countries will take about 10 years.

The current round of enlargement increases the length of NATO's borders by 31 per cent. Hungary, one of the three new countries, does not have a border with any other member state; it sits alone with other non-NATO countries between it and its allies, although that would, of course, change if Slovakia became a member.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Slovenia.

Mr. Maples: I am talking about the geographical gap, and Slovenia would provide only a narrow corridor between Italy and Hungary.

The fact that new members will have to restructure and upgrade their forces will, in the short term, reduce NATO's overall military effectiveness; as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) pointed out, that is likely to take some time.

What should the criteria be for new membership? The military and strategic considerations that I have mentioned should remain paramount, but we must remember that, as the Foreign Secretary said, many of the applicant countries regard themselves as European; they believe that, over the past 50 or 60 years, they were temporarily detached from Europe by Russian imperialism. If we denied them membership, we should be sending a clear and unwelcome message, and perhaps drive them back into the Russian orbit.

Difficult decisions must be taken. Although we must encourage progress towards greater democracy and freedom, we must be careful that that does not lead states into thinking that they will be entitled to membership if they meet certain conditions. No state should be ruled out from membership, but there can be no timetable or fixed commitments. The essential conditions for membership must be that an applicant country is internally stable and at peace with its neighbours and that it has stable and responsible Government and political institutions. Moreover, it must be able to make a real military contribution to its own defence without imposing heavy military or strategic commitments on others.

The intermediate status of membership in the "Partnership for Peace", the European Atlantic partnership council, the European Union or the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe should reinforce the confidence of former Warsaw pact countries that are not members of NATO. All those organisations have great value in their own right, not only as stepping stones to something else. We do not regard membership of the European Union as a stepping stone to NATO membership; it is, and should continue to be, possible to be a member of NATO without being a member of the European Union, and vice versa

Mr. Colvin: Before my hon. Friend leaves that point, will he say whether he agrees that some countries that want to become members of NATO—and the European Union, for that matter—have equally important bilateral relations with their neighbours? The Baltic states collectively have a bilateral agreement with the United States of America, which has important security implications for them as they wait and hope to join NATO.

Mr. Maples: My hon. Friend is right to say that we should not regard NATO membership as the only solution

to many of these problems. Membership of the organisations that I have mentioned may offer something, and he suggests other possibilities.

As I said, I want to look at the matter from Russia's point of view. We must remember that Russia was one of the world's two super-powers. It had a large empire, and was the second biggest military power in the world. Now, it is much diminished—it is much smaller, its economy is in a parlous state and its military capability is a pale shadow of what it was. Although we cannot allow Russia to have a veto on NATO's future, NATO must recognise Russia's legitimate interests and how it sees things. Rightly or wrongly, Russia regards NATO's expansion with suspicion.

We must acknowledge that it is a legitimate aim of Russian foreign policy to seek security and secure borders. Russia no doubt feels that there is a need for there to be other states between NATO's eastern borders and its own western borders. I am not pretending that the issue is not difficult, but we cannot ignore it or pretend that it does not exist.

I wholly agree with the Foreign Secretary that it is vital that Russia, Ukraine and the other countries of the former Soviet Union are brought back fully into the international community. The west has devoted substantial resources and efforts to that end, and we all hope for success.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would not be to the benefit of European security if we were to let the Russian Government believe that they could ever exercise a veto on the decision of any free, independent, democratic country, on its borders or elsewhere, to come into a collective security arrangement in its own interests and the interests of its neighbours?

Mr. Maples: I agree entirely, but it would be foolish and short-sighted not to take into account the Russian point of view. In 10 years' time, Russia's view may be completely different, but we should never consider the question solely from a western, or even American, point of view.

Russia seems to have accepted the three new members, and there are one or two others to which it would probably have no objection, but would it take the same attitude to, for instance, Romania and Bulgaria or the Baltic states, which involve specific problems, such as the substantial Russian minorities living there, and access to Kaliningrad? The United States has recently been supportive of the Baltic states' desire to join, but Russia has made it clear that it would view that as a serious threat.

According to the BBC's summary of world broadcasts, a Russian Minister said in June that he viewed NATO's planned expansion eastward, and especially the possible admission of former Soviet republics to the alliance, as a "serious threat to Russia". In May, the Russian President himself warned in *The Guardian* that NATO would cross a perilous red line if it invited the Baltic states or Ukraine to join. We have to take those views seriously, even though they may change over the next five or 10 years—I hope that they will.

There is a danger of NATO expansion helping the cause of the ultra-nationalists in Russia by undermining the position of the western-oriented democrats, who may not be able to persuade other Russian politicians that it is a benign development. That would be a tragedy, because it could help to create a new threat. There is obviously suspicion in Russia, because the START 2 treaty is stalled in the Duma, and doubts are being expressed about the conventional forces agreement.

I agree entirely with the American Secretary of State and the Foreign Secretary that Russia cannot have a veto, but we would be foolish to ignore its concerns.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Russia may have fears, but if those fears are misplaced, our duty is to allay them. The expansion to include the new east European countries offers Russia far more security, because they will come under the umbrella of NATO military doctrine and discipline, with civilian control of the military, which will make them far more stable neighbours than they might otherwise have been.

Mr. Maples: The hon. Gentleman makes two points, one of which I agree with and the other of which I am not so sure about. I agree that we must try to allay the fears. There are a variety of programmes to try to do that, and to develop constructive and peaceful relationships with the countries of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw pact.

I have tried to say why I do not agree with the second point. Russia has some suspicions. I entirely agree with the Foreign Secretary that those are unfounded and that we are not a threat to Russia, but that is not how Russia sees it.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) *rose—*

Mr. Wilkinson *rose—*

Mr. Maples: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson).

Mr. Wilkinson: The fundamental point that needs to be put on the record is that the Baltic states were free and democratic before they were incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, by force of arms and against their will, so no one should take away their legitimate democratic inheritance by bullying or cajoling.

Mr. Maples: Of course that is true, and I completely agree with my hon. Friend. My point was simply that this is a two-way street: the Baltic states may want to join NATO, but we have a say in whether we accept them, and, when we come to make that decision, I hope that we will consider seriously the military commitment that we are making to them. One does not have to be a great historian or geographer to realise that that will be a difficult commitment to fulfil.

There are significant Russian minorities living in the Baltic states, and there is a piece of Russian territory, at Kaliningrad, which can be accessed only through those states. In any case, their accession is probably a long way off, so the issue remains somewhat theoretical. I simply want to put more emphasis than the Foreign Secretary did on the military aspects of our commitments.

There are widely differing estimates of the cost of having the new members. That is incredibly important, because it relates directly to the military and strategic

[Mr. Maples]

factors involved in defending the territory of a new member state. The mainstream estimates vary from $1.5 billion up to about $10 billion, although, as the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said, the congressional budget office at one point had an estimate about 10 times higher than that.

The Select Committee said that it thought that the likely cost was in the middle of that range, and the Government say that they are confident of their estimate. I only hope that they are right; otherwise, we will all pay a very high price for NATO expansion, despite being told that there is no military threat. I am concerned that the low estimate is effectively based on the assumption that NATO has no enemies, which implies that, if a threat emerges in future, there will be extra spending to be met. I hope that we can be more confident of such estimates in future, and that there will not be quite such a wide range.

It is a significant task to integrate Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into the alliance.

Mr. George Robertson: The hon. Gentleman said that he would not be here at the end of the debate, and that he would not want to divide the House on the issue, but he has made a very long speech setting out all the reasons against taking the three countries into NATO. Will he say outright whether he and his party are in favour of NATO enlarging to incorporate those countries?

Mr. Maples: The right hon. Gentleman anticipates me, because I was going to say that we fully support those countries' membership. I have taken an awful lot of interventions. Apart from those, I have spoken for only about 15 minutes, which is half the time that the Foreign Secretary took. I am sure that his contribution was worth more than mine, but I nevertheless think that the Defence Secretary's stricture was not fully justified.

We fully support the accession of the three new members, but it will be a significant task to integrate them into NATO's military structure, and that must be substantially completed before there is any further expansion. We should be cautious about having more new members until it is clear how the situation in central and eastern Europe is developing. Almost all the countries that want to join fail at least one of the tests that I set out earlier.

NATO has an enormous current agenda without further enlargement: the integration of the three new members; developing a new strategic concept; and building relationships with Russia and its former allies. Those are all significant tasks, which will take much effort and time. Let us ensure that they are concluded satisfactorily before proceeding any further.

10.28 am

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I am relieved that, at long last, the House is discussing NATO enlargement. When the Defence Select Committee visited NATO very early in the new year, we met the Secretary-General, Mr. Solana, who ever so politely expressed his hope that Britain would be the first, or at least almost the first, country to endorse enlargement. Now we are into July, and four member states—Canada, Denmark, Norway and Germany—have completed all their ratification procedures and formally ratified the enlargement protocols. They have deposited the protocols with the depository state, the United States of America.

The Parliaments of Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Iceland, France, Spain and the USA have all approved the enlargement protocols, but their Governments have not yet deposited the instruments of ratification. The Belgian Senate has approved the protocols, and its lower house will do so shortly. That leaves the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Portugal and Turkey as the member states whose Parliaments have yet to approve the protocols, or in our case even to debate them in full.

Frankly, I am not entirely happy with that arrangement. As has been said, we were the instigator of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1949, and it has been embarrassing, bordering on humiliating, going to the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary to talk to diplomats and politicians who have been asking, "When will your Parliament ratify our membership of NATO?" The business managers and the Government have had an enormously hectic programme, but it is with some relief that we are now finally to approve ratification.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that neither of the principal Opposition spokesmen will be here for the reply? Last week, the shadow Defence Secretary was not present for the important land mines debate. Frankly, that shows a lackadaisical, if not frivolous, approach by the Opposition Front-Bench team to such important defence and foreign policy matters. The sooner that they are replaced by people who would do the job, the better for Parliament.

Mr. George: The last thing that I want to do is contribute to a descent into partisanship in what is basically a non-partisan environment, although I would have preferred the debate to take place on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.

My second parliamentary point is not directed at my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and for Defence, and I am not patronising them when I say that I admire what they have done and what they are doing. They are both exceedingly competent. My criticism is that of hon. Members for many decades and is about the process of ratification. The deputy Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), raised that matter when he jumped up to retaliate early in the debate.

Our Parliament is about the only one—bar Canada—that has no real role in the ratification process. I dignified our proceedings today deliberately, although erroneously, by saying that we were ratifying, but we are doing nothing of the sort; we are debating. Clearly, the Modernisation Committee must realise—the Defence Select Committee report spelled this out in great detail—what is wrong with our alleged ratification system.

The hon. Member for Romsey referred to the Ponsonby rules and said how important they were. We should go beyond those, because few Ponsonby treaties have been debated here unless we have been compelled to debate and formally ratify them. This Parliament has no formal input in treaty-making, which is the prerogative of the Executive acting on behalf of the Crown, as we all know. That system is profoundly unsatisfactory, and this Parliament is in a minority in being totally marginalised

in the process. In virtually every other democratic country, it is not simply the prerogative of the Government or the Crown to ratify a treaty. Why is that not the case here? It should be up to us.

The Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees, or the relevant Select Committee, should consider the matter and make representations to the House, and there should be a formal vote as part of the treaty-making process, not simply a polite add-on to ratification. That is a general principle, and I hope that, in due course, the House will unite to demand, not ask, that we function as a legislature is supposed to and not be seen as simply an appendage to the Executive in decision making.

Having got that off my considerable chest, I can move on to the subject of debate. Perversely, I shall start with the conclusion of the excellent Defence Select Committee report. Paragraph 117 answers some of the criticisms of the Opposition. We produced earlier reports on NATO enlargement in the 1994–95 and 1995–96 Sessions. We shall also be producing a report before the 50th anniversary of NATO in the middle of next year.

As we said in our latest report,

"[illegible]hould embark upon this new era . . . with our eyes open."

We concluded:

"A long period of debate has culminated in the current proposals which the NATO governments have put before us."

We recommended

"that the House endorse the admission of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the North Atlantic Alliance."

We are unequivocal about our recommendation, but we are cautious, because we must consider the legitimate anxieties of Russia and listen carefully to the anxieties of the countries in eastern and central Europe that were hijacked into the Soviet orbit just before or just after the second world war and that are desperate to return to our political and democratic culture. Not all of them subscribed in the 1930s to that culture—the Governments of eastern Europe then were not all perfect democracies by any stretch of the imagination.

However, can one imagine what the message would have been from NATO Parliaments or Governments if we had said, after such a lengthy period of debate as to who should join, "Sorry lads, you're out—Russians in, Hungary out"? It would be Russians in, in the sense that we would be accepting their veto, and we would just have to tell those other countries to wait. The consequences would have been politically disastrous. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic deserve to be reincorporated into Europe—into its security, political and economic environment.

In due course, although again one has to be cautious, Slovenia, Romania and perhaps in a few years Slovakia and Bulgaria—but not yet—will be added to the list. We must develop NATO's absorbative capacity. When the three new countries have been formally admitted, NATO should consider further enlargement, but it should be selective.

We must be concerned about the effect on Russia. To a large extent, we have accommodated that country's views. We have done so in a variety of ways. Russian officers are now in NATO and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, or SHAPE—no longer do the Russians have to employ Soviet military intelligence, as the information is largely there for them and is handed to them. There are the "Partnership for Peace", the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, and the NATO-Russia permanent joint council. There are treaties with Russia and the Ukraine. The G7 has admitted Russia. Russians are working alongside troops from NATO countries in Bosnia. There are enormous financial injections from western countries into development and democratisation in Russia.

Mr. Corbyn: Does my hon. Friend accept that NATO's expansion to the borders of Russia provides the Russian generals and military-industrial complex with strong arguments for expanding expenditure at the expense of the poorest people in Russia? NATO will also cause large increases in defence costs for the new applicant members.

Mr. George: I disagree with my hon. Friend, as he might expect. The Defence Committee hoped that the accession of the three countries would not be seen by American, British, German or French defence manufacturers as a chance to step into countries that can barely afford existing security expenditures. We do not want to destroy developing economies by lumbering them with enormously costly aircraft. Clearly, those countries must spend sufficient money to join NATO, but many countries are drifting down towards the level of expenditure of those three countries. As our spending is projected to be 2.3 per cent. of gross domestic product, we are going perilously close to the spending of countries that cannot afford to be in NATO.

There is anxiety among generals, and among both Russophobes and Russophiles, about the weakness of the former Soviet Union. In talking to generals and politicians in Russia, I often hear the same attitudes that were expressed by the State Department in the United States just after the Falklands war. The State Department official then responsible for relations with Latin America, now deceased, was visited by a large delegation of Latin American Foreign Ministers and ambassadors, and they admonished him and the United States Government for supporting the United Kingdom in the conflict. They gave him hell, but as they left, one after another of them walked past him out of the view of their fellow ambassadors and Foreign Ministers, and winked at him as if to say, "I had to say that, didn't I?" One feels that many people raise ritualistic objections.

One of the contributors to my seminal *Jane's NATO Handbook*, which was purchased only by the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell)—at £125 a copy, I can understand why—was Rainer Rupp, who is well known to some hon. Members. Rupp is now doing 12 years in the slammer in Germany for transmitting 29,000 pages of classified NATO documentation to East German intelligence. That must have been the greatest exercise in confidence building in world history. Comrade Rupp's transmission of information surely led the Soviet Union to realise that we were weak, and that we were not aggressive. I hope that the Russians will realise that they do not confront NATO in an eyeball-to-eyeball cold war environment. We are partners, and we are working together. It is as much in our interests as theirs that they should democratise and modernise their economy and their political culture.

Khrushchev said more than 30 years ago that NATO would one day include the Soviet Union as a member, and everyone laughed. Who knows what will happen five,

[Mr. George]

10 or 15 years from now, but anyone who argues that NATO is superfluous, or that Russia should be incorporated now, is being premature, to put it politely.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend may not be aggressive, but the Russians are faced by the 10 conditions set out by Senator Jesse Helms. The third of those conditions is the explicit rejection of a nuclear-free central Europe. Did my hon. Friend's Defence Committee reflect on the Helms conditions?

Mr. George: It would be unfair of me to criticise the chairman of another country's Foreign Relations Committee, but Jesse Helms does not, thankfully, sit alongside Bill Clinton in decision making. Senator Helms's Committee has a great deal of power, but, even as a proponent of more power for our Committees, I realise when I see the powers exercised in the United States that there must be some exceptions.

I do not regularly read the *Morning Star* but, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) contributes, I do. Earlier this week, the paper reflected the paranoia in some circles in both the west and the former Soviet Union. There are fears that war is about to burst out, or that we are all aggressive. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence would have smiled to read:

"Our own defence review in Britain, for instance, provides for greater expenditure".

Perhaps I have been asleep for the past week. If that statement were true, I would be frankly delighted, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend would be delighted, too. However, it is not.

Such collective paranoia suggests that the end of the cold war has left us all spending more on defence. However, our spending has gone from 5.2 per cent. of GDP under the previous Government to about 2.5 per cent. now, and we are drifting a little lower. I see no evidence of a build-up of military equipment and threats. We have only one mechanism—Trident—for delivering nuclear weapons, and the numbers of warheads and missiles are dropping way below the numbers in France, which some hon. Members consider, although I do not, a greater threat than Russia. I say that in jest, so no one should think that I am totally paranoid.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: A practical example of the unfounded paranoia to which the hon. Gentleman refers is the fact that Russian troops took part in NATO's intervention force in Bosnia. He and I saw at Tuzla that they were under direct command of the United States general who was in overall command, and they were able to operate reasonably, sensibly and constructively.

Mr. George: I agree.

We are used in the House to dealing with the paranoid, but the situation in Russia can be terrifying. Several of us attended, in Copenhagen, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Russian delegation included Zhirinovsky. With the security of parliamentary privilege, I can say that he is, at least in his public pronouncements, certifiable. I suspect that he is much saner and more rational than the public image that he creates would suggest.

About three months ago, I went to a meeting of the Duma, which was headed by people who had recently been converted to the idea of parliamentary control of the Executive. The meeting was held in a Communist party caucus room where there was an enormous bust of Lenin. We should remember that the words emanating from the Duma are those of true unreconstructed cold warriors. While we must listen, we must not get obsessed by what we hear.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In support of what the hon. Gentleman says, does he agree that there is a parallel between the argument that we must not take certain steps for fear of upsetting or strengthening the warmongers in Russia and that of unilateralists between 1981 and 1987 that, if NATO pressed on with nuclear deterrence, it would make war more, not less, likely? The reverse was the case, and he was one of a relatively small minority of Labour Members who stood up for that view.

Mr. George: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. He knows a little about penetrating left-wing organisations from his early political career. I am sure that much of the work of the Stasi and KGB was based on his successful penetration of the Labour party in early 1980s. We have to be balanced, and we are.

I have examined costs, on which much nonsense has been written. There are reports by the congressional budget office, Rand, the United States Department of Defence, NATO and the Polish Euro-Atlantic Association. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) published a report under the auspices of the North Atlantic Assembly. Much of the confusion arises because some studies are based on there being four new entrants and a longer time scale. They were made rather early on. We concluded that the cost of NATO enlargement is a bargain for the UK. The Secretary of State for Defence had said that it represented each year the cost of a quarter of a Eurofighter. Even if it doubled to a half, the UK would have gained enormously from its contribution to NATO enlargement.

We strongly argue that the cost may eventually fall between the alarmist costs suggested by the congressional budget office and Rand reports and that suggested by the NATO study. The Committee states:

"We conclude, therefore, that it would be as well, in choosing to endorse the process of enlargement, to be prepared for the costs shared among the 19 members of NATO to drift up at least towards the mid-range between NATO's $1.5 billion over ten years and the US DoD's $5-6 billion over thirteen years."

That might seem expensive, but the decision to endorse enlargement will be made not on economic but on political grounds. I firmly believe that the costs are manageable, and not high.

There are some hon. Members—there were more before 1 May last year—who are as enthusiastic about joining NATO as about joining the masons. They believe that we should have kept out. I have no sense of guilt about supporting NATO, even in the heyday of the cold war; quite the reverse. Like any sane person, I knew that it was necessary in 1949 to establish a defensive military and political alliance.

People seem to forget, because they do not want to remember, that NATO has always been as much a political as a military alliance. It incorporated new

members and it will incorporate more. It has reformed incredibly. People who are prepared to look can only admire how NATO has adapted to the new world environment. NATO is still necessary. It would be lunatic beyond words to subscribe to the old mid-1980s philosophy of peace groups that the alliance should wither away or collapse precipitately and be replaced by a collective security organisation that I would have regarded as akin to the League of Nations.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is describing the Foreign Secretary's views in the mid-1980s as lunatic beyond words.

Mr. George: The Foreign Secretary is exceedingly competent. Like the Labour party, he has adapted over the years, but, even when he was anti-nuclear weapons, he was unequivocally pro-NATO. Many people on the same side of the Labour party as me in the early 1980s thought that money spent on Trident could be better spent on enhancing our conventional capability.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. George: No, I shall not give way.

The policy is right now. It is not that we have been converted to being pro-defence. Conservative Members should invest in my other study, "The British Labour Party and Defence".

Mr. Menzies Campbell: How much?

Mr. George: It is much cheaper. If Conservative Members invested in it, they would see that all that we are doing is returning to our roots of being very pro-defence. If I were in a provocative mood, I would invite them to read our parliamentary debates in 1940 to find which parties favoured a strong effort against Nazi Germany. It was the Liberals and the Labour party. I shall not make that point.

I do not feel guilty about the NATO of the past or of the future. I believe that, in enhancing our security, it will enhance not only the security of the three countries that will join it formally next year but that of people in the countries that have not yet had their requests for membership agreed. It is certainly enhancing the security of people living in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, and, even more certainly, Bosnia. This is an alliance for the future. The day may come when it can wither away, but I suspect that it will not be in the lifetime of any hon. Member in the Chamber at the moment.

Having spoken at excessive length, for which I apologise, I urge all hon. Members to endorse the recommendations of the Government, of all NATO Governments and of the countries that are desperate to join, backed, in most cases, by their public opinion. Above all, I urge hon. Members to accept the recommendations of the Defence Committee by saying a resounding yes to enlarging the alliance to include the three additional members.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Some of us have waited for more than a year for this debate. It is intolerable not only that it should be held on a Friday when most Members have gone to their constituencies but that it should be interrupted by a Government statement that will interfere with an important debate. We protest in the strongest terms.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is not a matter for the Chair how the business of the House is arranged. In view of the tightness of time, making such points only detracts from the time available. Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith.

10.57 am

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I did not realise that I deserved this honour, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that you had recognised me for another reason. I shall take advantage of the minute or two left before the statement that the Government feel it necessary to make today. It could have waited.

The North Atlantic treaty would not have been signed had it not been for the Soviet threat but NATO has never been regarded by those of us who have studied it as a purely military alliance. One has only to examine the treaty preamble, which clearly articulates support for

"democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law".

I make that point because it explains why, with the end of the cold war and with no imminent Soviet threat, NATO was not disbanded.

My view is that, had NATO not responded to the challenge of building a new security architecture for Europe following the end of the cold war, the people of western Europe would have said, "What is the purpose of this military alliance? The cold war has ended. Russian communism is dead and buried and the Soviet threat has disappeared." The answer to the question "Why not disband it?" that was posed in people's minds was based on the statement made in 1967, when the Harmel doctrine, as it was called, was adopted. It made it clear that NATO strategy was to be based on a twin-tracked policy of maintaining adequate defence while seeking a relaxation of tensions between east and west Europe.

In short, NATO was not just a military alliance; it was and continues to be a political alliance—

It being Eleven o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings).*

Pensions

11 am

The Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women (Ms Harriet Harman): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement.

The Government are modernising the welfare state to meet the changing needs of the 21st century. We inherited a system that was failing on all counts. It was failing to tackle poverty, despite spending more. It was failing to help people work, and was writing them off to benefit dependency.

Reform is necessary—work for those who can work and security for those who cannot. We have already set about the task. We have established the new deals—with the biggest ever investment in opportunities. We are not only helping the young and long-term unemployed, but for the first time helping those whose aspirations had not previously been recognised, whose benefit dependency had simply not been addressed—lone parents and people with disabilities and health problems. We are overhauling the child support system, setting up a comprehensive counter-fraud strategy and raising child benefit with extra help for the poorest families.

We are committed to fundamental reform of incapacity benefit for new claimants. We aim to spend less on incapacity benefit, and to provide more help for severely disabled people with the greatest needs and more help for disabled people to return to work. We will improve gateways into disability benefits, and we have already begun discussions with disability organisations about that.

Helping people into work helps them to be better off than they can be on benefits, but it will also help them to provide more for themselves in their retirement. Later this year, we will publish a Green Paper setting out our long-term strategic proposals for pensions. Now we are starting pensions reform for today's pensioners.

This House rightly places great emphasis on the concerns of older people—people who have worked hard all their lives either out at work or bringing up a family; the generation who fought in the war. They are entitled to security in their retirement. They deserve dignity in their retirement.

There has been much focus on the basic state pension, and that is right. It must remain the foundation of income in retirement. We will uprate it at least in line with prices, but we know that pensioners feel that their concerns were not central to the previous Government, and they want action now.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced to the House the abolition of charges for eye tests for all pensioners. On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will announce new concessionary travel for all pensioners. Today I can announce to the House, as part of the comprehensive spending review, extra help with winter fuel payments for all pensioners.

We have already made a winter fuel payment of £20 to all pensioner households and announced our intention to do so again this winter. As a result of cutting VAT on fuel, our winter fuel payments and other changes, average pensioner fuel bills are as much as £100 lower this year. As part of the comprehensive spending review, we have allocated a further £0.5 billion to make those winter fuel payments a permanent feature of all pensioners' income. All pensioners will know that, in addition to the help with their fuel bills from our cut in value added tax to 5 per cent., they will get a winter fuel payment of £20.

There are elderly people for whom even the extra help of the basic state pension increase and the winter fuel payment is simply not enough. These are the pensioners whose income has fallen furthest behind. Typically, they have no occupational pension, no private pension, no savings, no state earnings-related pension scheme, sometimes not even the full entitlement to the basic state pension. They fall back on income support. They have fallen further and further behind. In a divided Britain, the gap between the poorest and the richest pensioners has been widening. It has been widening for 30 years, and without decisive Government action is set to widen further.

This Government are committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion and we are not prepared to let that happen. We are taking action. We will establish a guaranteed minimum income for pensioners. So, for the poorest pensioners, we are increasing their income by three times the increase in income support that they would have received had we awarded only the usual price uprating. For 1.5 million of the poorest pensioners, this is the biggest single increase they have ever had.

For the first time, all pensioners will have a guaranteed minimum income of not less than £75 a week. For the first time, pensioner couples are guaranteed a minimum income of £116.60. The oldest pensioners will get even more.

There are some pensioners who are even poorer than those on income support. They are some of the very poorest people in Britain. They are the pensioners who are entitled to income support, but are not getting it; those who are slipping through the safety net altogether—the forgotten pensioners. This is not a marginal issue involving just a few slipping through the net. We estimate there are as many as 1 million of these forgotten pensioners. They are mostly very elderly, and nearly all women. Now we are taking action to bring the guaranteed minimum income to them, too.

Starting from next April, we will be introducing, for the first time, a new national programme of personal advisers for pensioners. We have already set up, and are running, nine pilot projects to help us shape this new service. Through new technology, we will for the first time use the information that pensioners have already given us throughout their lives. We will match the data that we already hold on their personal records in the Contributions Agency, the Benefits Agency and the local authority records to identify those who are likely to be over pension age, entitled to income support and not receiving it.

The pensioner will then be contacted by the personal adviser, who, over the telephone or through a visit, will assess their entitlement, and then fill in the forms for them. All that pensioners will have do is sign, and their extra money will come through the following week.

Yesterday, I visited one of the pilot projects in Torfaen in Wales and met some of the pensioners who had already been helped. The pensioners were all absolutely clear about two things. First, the extra money, even where it was only a small amount, meant a great deal to them. It is desperately needed. Secondly, without the personal

contact, there would have been absolutely no chance of their getting the money. It is right that we are taking this service nationwide. It will begin to tackle the hidden problem of pensioner poverty.

Today, my announcement marks a major modernisation of the pensions system. We have been able to deliver real help for pensioners within a social security budget that is set to grow more slowly in this Parliament than it did in the last, to take a lower share of gross domestic product, and to take a lower share of public spending as a whole. It is part of our pensions reform and marks a new approach to tackling the problem of pensioner poverty and inequality.

We promised to reform the welfare state around work for those who can work. We have made progress on that. We promised security for whose who cannot work. Today we make progress on that too. This marks a major step forward in our determination to deliver security and dignity in retirement for all.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of her statement, although I did not receive the last two minutes, so some of the details will have to be studied later.

Today's statement is as fascinating for the detail, which I shall address later, as for the omissions. The way in which we account for how we pay for the changes and how pensioners receive the increases depends to a large extent on how well the economy does, which clearly depends dramatically on how the social security budget is either kept in check or reduced. What has happened over the past few days is a deliberate attempt by the Government to talk themselves out of a pledge that they gave at the time of the last election.

The quotes are straightforward and simple. The Prime Minister said at the time of the last election:

"we have said as we get the welfare bills down, these appallingly high bills for social and economic failure under the Conservatives, then we can release more money into education and health and the services . . . we really want".

Therefore, my first question for the Secretary of State is this: why are she and the Prime Minister now trying to pretend that the Labour party did not pledge to reduce the costs of social security?

The 1996 Labour document, "Getting Welfare to Work—A New Vision for Social Security" states clearly that they had "three fundamental goals", the second of which was,

"to save money for the taxpayer, as the benefit bill reduces."

That is the key: the Government are acting like a bunch of con men, trying to persuade the public that they never made such a pledge. It is not an easy pledge to meet, but the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State must answer the question—why are they trying to avoid it?

In her statement, the Secretary of State spoke of reducing dependency and of the pledges in that respect, but it is clear that, like a number of the Government's measures, the working families tax credit—I know that the Secretary of State does not want that to be in the social security budget, but the fact is that it replaces benefit payment, so it is in that budget—raises dependency quite dramatically, as more than 400,000 extra people will enter dependency as a result. That is another broken pledge.

The key to today's statement is the question of how the pensions are to be afforded. We need to determine how much of the money will be long-term and sustainable, so let us look at the reality of the welfare budget—how much the Government have managed to secure through reductions, and what that means overall. The document about which the Chancellor made a statement on Tuesday is significant for the absence of most of the money within the social security budget of which it is necessary to take proper consideration.

For example, we saw that the Government had taken out administration costs—roughly £3.5 billion a year. They have also taken out the working families tax credit, with most of it hidden in accounting adjustments, but with 20 per cent. hidden elsewhere. Those figures should have been included, because they represent money that was family credit and part of overall benefit payments.

When we look at the figures, despite the absence of calculations on housing benefit, council tax benefit and other benefits, we begin to get a much truer picture of what the state of the budget is and, more important, is likely to be over the next few years. The figures tell us that, before Labour's arrival in government, the welfare budget was falling each year, year on year; and that, as a direct result of the previous Government's actions, it went into negative growth in the first year of the new Labour Government—it actually fell to less than 12 per cent. of GDP. That figure was clearly the result of the activities of the previous Government—so to say that the Conservatives did not reduce the overall burden of welfare or reduce the costs of welfare as a proportion of GDP is utterly absurd. The figure fell below 12 per cent. and was likely to fall further.

When we then examine the Government's figures with all the relevant figures having been added back in, as the Library has done for us—

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): When is the hon. Gentleman going to talk about pensions?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I shall get on to pensions, all right.

The point about affording pensions lies absolutely in whether or not the costs of welfare are being reduced or increased. In reality—even according to the Government's own predictions—once working families tax credit has been added back in, the budget is set to rise to 12.3 per cent. of GDP by 2001. From what independent analysts have calculated in the past few days, we can begin to see that, even if there is only slight variation in growth, that budget forecast is likely to rise to more than 12.5 per cent. of GDP; and if growth becomes worse, it will rise to nearly 13 per cent. of GDP by the end of this Parliament.

All that bears directly on the Government's ability to afford what they say they want to pay to pensioners and others, so why did the Secretary of State allow such misleading figures to be published? Does she accept that the figures in the book that was published on Tuesday are not correct; and that, when the money relevant to the social security budget is added back in, the proposal breaks the Government's pledge about reducing the overall burden of welfare as a proportion of GDP?

Several questions remain to be answered, even after today's statement. The statements on health and education dealt with the entirety of the changes and the implications for the budget, but today the Secretary of State has chosen not to talk about the entirety of the changes, so a huge number of questions arise. The comprehensive spending

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

review says that the new education maintenance allowance will be "linked to parental income". Will the Secretary of State clarify whether child benefit—

Mr. McNulty: When is the hon. Gentleman going to talk about pensions?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman probably does not realise that child benefit is part of the social security budget.

Will child benefit be taxed or means-tested as a result of that declaration? Will the Secretary of State also tell the House how much money the Government expect to raise from the announced switch to education maintenance allowance, or will spending on child benefit and EMA remain the same as the total spending on child benefit, but simply be reallocated?

Why were no decisions on the future of disability benefits explained in the statement? Why was there nothing on housing benefit and council tax benefit? Why was there no mention of the change programme? Part of the proposal to hold costs in check relies wholly on what happens in respect of restraining administrative costs, which remain fairly flat in the Government's forecast. What are the Government likely to receive in terms of such cuts?

In his statement on Tuesday, the Chancellor announced a target of 40,000 lone parents going back into work as a result of the new deal programme, which bears directly on the social security budget, which has a bearing on pensions, to which subject I shall turn in a second. In a debate on Monday, the Secretary of State said that she would announce no targets until she had received the full understanding of what was entailed in the programme currently in place. Did she receive that understanding overnight? How is it that the Chancellor was able to announce on Tuesday a target of 40,000 lone parents going back into work as a result of the Government's programmes?

Conservatives have always upheld, and will continue to uphold, the principle that the most vulnerable, especially pensioners, should be assisted in claiming their full benefit entitlements; and that those entitlements should reach the level required for people to have a sustainable income in retirement. Yet the question remains whether the increases announced today are real and sustainable and will not be clawed back in due course as a direct result of the Government losing control of the economy, as has happened so often under Labour Governments. The Government have already clawed money from pensioners through their hit on advance corporation tax dividend tax credit, which has taken £5 billion a year from pensioners who bother to save.

The new higher so-called guaranteed income is a massive increase in means testing. It represents a complete U-turn from the more sensible policies advocated by the Labour party when in opposition, and, more particularly, some of the more sensible utterances of the Minister for Welfare Reform, who said that extending means testing would be a retrograde step. Not only will it have a devastating effect on the incentive to save of people on modest incomes, who have been encouraged and who want to save, but it will deprive them of the enhanced means-tested benefit.

The Government now have a policy that will simultaneously greatly increase both dependency and Government expenditure. How do the Government propose to persuade more people to claim their means-tested benefits? How much more money will be lost in bureaucracy?

The Secretary of State talked about advisers, but I want to know how many she expects there to be. There are 10 million pensioners in this country, of whom only 1.7 million claim income support, so, if the Government's intentions are to be taken seriously, that must mean that more than 8 million pensioners will have to be screened or visited. If one civil servant can screen roughly 1,000 pensioners a year, that means more than 8,000 new civil servants, at a cost of £250 million every year, spent just on bureaucracy. How much of the money for pensioners will have to be allocated to the bureaucratic mechanisms that will be necessary?

Does not that also mean that the Secretary of State's proposals will begin the erosion of the contributory principle which so many hon. Members on both sides of the House think should be enhanced rather than clawed away? In the present proposals, the Government have sounded the absolute cry that they no longer consider the contributory principle to be the mainstay, and bit by bit, they will extend the means-testing process across the whole state income.

As the Secretary of State knows, one of the reasons why many pensioners do not claim income support is that they do not like the idea of taking what they view as charity, but they believe in taking their basic state pension because they view that not as charity but as a provision to which they have contributed. How is the Secretary of State building on that? Surely she is asking all those people, to whom income support may not be at all relevant, to declare their incomes when they did not do so before.

In conclusion, the issue is sustainability and whether the Government, like so many Labour Governments, have for short-term reasons declared that they will somehow raise incomes only to claw them back as the economy fails and they fail on their pledge to cut social security and welfare dependency. In a few years, pensioners up and down the country will find their incomes falling, not rising, as a result of the Government's actions and failures.

Ms Harman: The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) has failed to address pensioner poverty and to say whether he thinks that we are right to tackle that problem by investing in help for pensioners and giving the greatest help to the poorest, who have been left behind. If, in addition to the help that we are giving all pensioners, we gave them the £2 billion that we have set aside for the poorest pensioners, the poorest would get just pence—they need pounds. We cannot limit the help that is needed by the poorest to that which we could prudently give to all. The problem is that the pensioners who have fallen behind—the very poorest—need extra money.

I shall tell the hon. Gentleman about one of the pensioners I met yesterday. She is an elderly widow who had been identified through our pilot project and given extra help. She told me that, instead of being able to buy only two apples at a time, she could now afford to buy a

pound of apples. We are talking about people who are living on the margins, while the hon. Gentleman is pursuing high-blown theory. The proposal aims to tackle pensioner poverty and give pensioners the help that they need.

The hon. Gentleman said that the proposal will lead to means testing and bureaucracy. He has not listened. Personal advisers will not have to visit all 10 million pensioners. Of course that is not our proposal. We are doing what his Government did not; we are using the data that we already hold on our computer systems to identify those who are likely to be vulnerable. The personal advisers will visit only those people, who are screened by new technology, so the question is not simply one of bureaucracy.

The hon. Gentleman said that there will be a massive increase in means testing. Presumably he opposes the measure, but he has no proposals to stop the poorest pensioners falling behind, and none to tackle the problem of the 1 million pensioners who, under his Government, fell through the net altogether.

The measure has nothing to do with the devastating effects on the incentives to save, which were caused by the rip-off of private pensions, in which £1 in every £4 was eaten up in costs and administrative charges. The devastating effect on personal pensions was caused by the scandal of pension mis-selling. This is a practical, sensible and socially just proposal for giving immediate help to those who are most in need, and we are right to make it.

The hon. Gentleman talked about overall spending figures. He made two points. He accused us of being misleading about the figures, and he took issue with the overall spending plans. He said that we had hidden social security administration figures. We have not; they are not hidden. They are on page 16 in table 1 of the comprehensive spending review, clear for all to see. Those figures cover three years.

The hon. Gentleman said also that the working families tax credit was an accounting fiddle and a broken promise. It is not; it is a promise being kept, to give more help to low-income working families and to make sure that work pays as part of our welfare-to-work programme.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Government have fiddled the figures.

Ms Harman: We have not fiddled the figures. There are times when figures move, as they did under Conservative Governments, from the social security budget to the health budget, from health to social security and in and out of the tax system.

I shall give examples. Did not the hon. Gentleman's Government remove spending on residential care in nursing homes? That was switched from the Department of Social Security to the Department of Health under community care. We did not argue that it should be put back into the DSS figures. It moved from the social security budget and the same amount was dealt with under community care. The Conservatives removed the cost of statutory sick pay from the social security budget. We did not argue that it should put back, because it was being paid differently.

We are restructuring the help that we give to low-income families in work. We are rightly paying that money through the tax system as part of a major reform of tax and benefit. All the figures are there to see, and we have accounted for them properly and publicly.

The hon. Gentleman talked also about the level of social security spending. Under the Conservatives—we have their record on which to judge them—the social security budget rose from 9.7 per cent. of gross domestic product to 12 per cent. Under this Government, it is set to fall from 12 per cent. to 11 per cent. While the social security budget was increasing in cash and percentage terms, poverty was also increasing. There was less help for those who needed it, but extra help was being given overall because more people depended on benefits who could and should have been in work. That is why we have said that we shall cut the cost of social and economic failure.

We shall invest, through the new deal, in opportunity and help those who can to work. All the lone parents who have gone to work under the new deal are, on average, better off by £39 a week than they were on benefit. That is tackling poverty. However, their benefit dependency has also decreased by £42 a week on average. That is our approach. We are investing in opportunity and cutting the cost of social and economic failure. At the general election, we set out what we would do to tackle poverty and social exclusion and to broaden opportunity. We said that social security would be part of reforming the welfare state. We have done that.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): Despite the icy-hearted response from the Conservative Front Bench, a great number of British people will applaud the measure to support citizens, many of whom are in their 80s and 90s, who are not only some of the most decent people in this country who have served us so well over the years, but some of the poorest.

However, I have a suggestion. As personal advisers will be calling on that group, could we ask them also to find out whether they are missing out on other parts of the welfare state, such as insulation grants—some elderly people make a choice in winter between eating and heating—and to advise them about the new free eye tests? Those are just two examples. The personal adviser system will be relatively expensive, and rightly so, but could we use it more generally as a human access point for the wider welfare state for people who ask so little but deserve so much from the rest of us?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The pensioner personal advisers—I pay tribute to the work that they are doing—are changing the face of social security and bringing help to people who have fallen through the net. They also advise on free eye tests and insulation grants.

Yesterday, I spoke to one pensioner and her personal adviser in Wales. She had a problem with another bill altogether—she was told that she owed more than she did—and her personal adviser helped her to sort it out. It is an overall service that helps vulnerable people with their problems and gets them help in their own homes when they need it. It is less expensive than spreading help thinly to all pensioners, although we are concerned about all pensioners: that is why we are providing free eye tests, concessionary travel and winter fuel payments and will retain the basic state pension as a foundation of income in retirement. However, we must get extra help to the very poorest.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Unlike the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith),

[Mr. Steve Webb]

I congratulate the Secretary of State, first on not keeping the Prime Minister's pre-election promise to cut welfare spending, and secondly on focusing help on poorer pensioners, about whom I have made representations on many occasions.

I welcome her statement this morning, but does she accept that, when history comes to judge the first two years of the new Labour Government, it will view them as a wasted opportunity because of the unnecessary adherence to Tory spending plans? Does she accept that, for many very elderly pensioners who are in the last years of their lives, two years is too long to wait? Would it not have been better as an immediate measure to increase the basic state pension for all older pensioners so that people got the money straight away?

Does the Secretary of State propose to link the proposed pension guarantee to earnings or prices? We very much welcome the above-inflation increase next April, but beyond that what will happen? If it is not linked to earnings, first, the Government will break their manifesto pledge that pensioners would share in general prosperity, and, secondly, the growth in pensioner income inequality that the Secretary of State professes to oppose will continue. So I hope that she will reassure us that it will be linked to earnings.

Finally, does the Secretary of State believe that she is subject to the Trade Descriptions Act? Can the minimum income guarantee to which she referred justify the word "guarantee"? For want of a better word, is it guaranteed, or is it the case that, even when the so-called guarantee is in place, tens of thousands and probably hundreds of thousands of pensioners—particularly those who are not claiming benefit—will still miss out, so that it is not a true guarantee?

Ms Harman: Before the election, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister promised to cut the cost of economic and social failure—the cost of people who depended on welfare and benefits but who could and wanted to work—and that is what he has delivered. I am happy to acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman and many of his hon. Friends have urged that we should give extra help to the poorest pensioners and criticised an approach that simply gave help to all and allowed the poorest to fall further behind. I acknowledge the part that his arguments have played in the change.

Reform of the welfare state has been under way since we took office. Last July I set up the new deal for lone parents. That is welfare reform, extending opportunities to those who did not have them before in order to increase their incomes and cut the cost of economic and social failure.

We started pensions reform very shortly after taking office, by investing millions of pounds in establishing pilot projects. We would not be in a position to target help nationally to the poorest pensioners had we not conducted piloted projects. The previous Government made no attempt to help the poorest pensioners. As soon as we were elected, we set about establishing pilot projects in order to be confident that we could take the policy forward. We are not announcing the start of activity, but going national on activity that we have been piloting, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the minimum income would be guaranteed. That is an important question, as it goes to the heart of the issue—those who are falling through the net altogether. We have not simply announced an increase and said that it is there for those who can get it; we shall make sure that we get it to those who need it through our system of data matching and personal advisers. We are investing in a new delivery system. It would have been the utmost cynicism to announce in the House a guaranteed minimum income for pensioners who were already identified and claiming income support. It is right that at the same time we are introducing a new delivery system to reach something like 1 million forgotten pensioners.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have to protect the main debate of the day, so I must appeal for short, single questions and short replies.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not a blot on the country that so many pensioners are forced to live in acute poverty? Many of them are ex-service men who sometimes wonder—and ask me at my surgeries—who actually won the war. Is it not absolutely essential that they are assisted, having been betrayed by the Tory Government? In respect of the concessionary travel to be announced on Monday, I hope that my right hon. Friend will try her very best to see to it that there can be a reduction in the cost of TV licences, as that, too, would be helpful to many retired people.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend has been a long-standing advocate for pensioners in his constituency and throughout the country, and I warmly welcome his comments. I am sure that they will be borne in mind by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Surely what is important is not whether it is called a minimum income guarantee or income support, but how much extra money will be in the pockets of pensioners. What does it mean for the contributory principle? Is not the statement, with its narrow focus, rather like the dog who did not bark in the night? Why is there not more talk about how cuts in total welfare spending—as promised at the election—will finance increases in public spending on health and education? Is it not time to admit that welfare spending has risen remorselessly in all western countries in the past 40 years; that the bulk of welfare spending falls quite rightly on pensions, the disabled and child benefit; and that it is impossible for the Government to deliver their promise to cut the total welfare bill?

Ms Harman: We promised to cut the cost of social and economic failure. The reduction in benefit dependency allows us to prioritise our resources on our manifesto commitments in health and education. As we are not spending money on those who could be working, we are able to direct the resources to those who are not working because they are in retirement.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that receipt of the new guaranteed minimum income will not affect entitlement to income

support? It would clearly be wrong to give increased pensions with one hand and take away entitlement to housing benefit and council tax rebate with the other. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that today's pensioners are demanding the restoration of the link with earnings and that, until that happens, her generation will not have redeemed their debt to them?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Many pensioners in Scotland are struggling to make ends meet. In fact, 156,000 pensioners do not have enough second pension or savings and depend on income support. However, we estimate that a further 100,000 pensioners in Scotland are entitled to income support but are not receiving it. My hon. Friend has been a long-standing advocate of our determination to tackle poverty and inequality. I am sure that he will agree that we should get help not only to the 156,000 who need a better standard of living, but to the 100,000 who are falling way behind. The guaranteed minimum income will ensure that all those pensioners will be much better off than they could ever have been with the previous rates of income support.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Although I very much welcome her statement, I have noticed that on two occasions now the Secretary of State has refused to make a commitment to restore the link between pensions and earnings. Given that, obviously, it is now the Government's position that the link will not be restored, will she recognise that, as hon. Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, the issue of concessionary payments will become even more important? Can she confirm, therefore, that the announcement that will be made on Monday on concessionary travel will mean that it will be available to all pensioners at the same level, wherever they live, and will she make it clear that the Government will reconsider the issue of concessionary TV licences?

Ms Harman: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will have to wait until Monday for confirmation of the details of the Deputy Prime Minister's statement. May I say, however, what an urgent issue the poverty of the poorest pensioners in Wales is? We estimate that probably more pensioners in Wales are entitled to income support and are not getting it than are entitled to income support and are getting it. As a result, of all those pensioners in Wales who fall below income support level, only about half receive income support. That is why I believe that the measures that we have announced today—a guaranteed minimum income for pensioners and an increase for all the poorest pensioners—will be especially important for pensioners in Wales.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, which will be welcomed by the pensioners of Putney and, equally important, by my 87-year-old mother and her friends. However, no mention has been made of the scandal of excess winter deaths of pensioners. Will the Secretary of State outline her action plan to deal with that scandal?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue—that of excess winter deaths. More people die in the winter than throughout the rest of the year. There are about 48,000 excess winter deaths among pensioners every year. If one compares that situation with that in countries where there is a much wider fluctuation of temperature, I am afraid that one can draw only one conclusion: pensioner poverty is contributing to the toll of deaths in the winter.

We were not prepared to stand by and allow that problem to continue growing when the prosperity of the country has increased in each of the past five years. The measures that we take today, which specifically focus extra help on the poorest pensioners, are urgently needed.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The Secretary of State has made several references to a pledge to cut the costs of social and economic failure. With the number of unemployed people and those claiming benefit rising, we are actually witnessing an increase in the costs of the Government's economic failure. Will the Secretary of State answer the very simple question that was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith)? How many personal pension advisers will be employed, what will be the cost of employing them, and what will be the cost of the data-matching exercise, which presumably will be on-going, in order to obtain the names of those pensioners who should be approached by their personal pension adviser?

Ms Harman: The hon. Lady made two points—first, on the issue of the cost of social and economic failure, and secondly, on the issue of personal advisers and costs. The number of lone parents on income support was increasing under the Conservative Government. There was no programme to help them to return to work. Married women were returning to work, and it was obvious that it should have been possible for lone parents to do so too, especially once their youngest child had started school.

We have introduced the new deal for lone parents. The number of lone parents on income support has fallen below 1 million for the first time, as the Prime Minister told the House on Wednesday, and it is forecast to fall by a further 40,000 next year. That is not a target; it is a forecast. We hope to move things even further forward with the new deal for lone parents. We are cutting the cost of economic and social failure. The bill to keep lone parents on income support at a low standard of living, with their children being brought up in a workless household, was rising. Under the present Government, backed by our programme of action, which will be augmented by the child care and the working families tax credit, that bill, which is a cost of economic and social failure, will fall.

The hon. Lady also asked about the number of personal advisers. As I have said, we are piloting their introduction. Details of the numbers of personal advisers and the costs of the new technology will be available when we have finished and evaluated the pilot project.

Mr. Duncan Smith: When?

Ms Harman: When I announced our plans, I said that that would be early next year. We have no doubts that it is better to do things this way. We cannot help the poorest

[Ms Harman]

pensioners with pence; we must help them with pounds. The previous Government did nothing to tackle that problem.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the Secretary of State tell us how pensioners are to cope with the twin problems that they currently face—a state pension that has been increased only in line with prices, not earnings, and is therefore £25 a week or more less than it should have been had that link been maintained; and the poverty trap in which many pensioners find themselves because they have a small secondary pension which takes them just above income support level and thus lose out on council tax and housing benefit entitlements? How will her proposals today affect those entitlements? Is she still considering a longer-term increase of the pension in line with earnings—the link that was so callously broken by the previous Tory Government?

Ms Harman: The Green Paper, which we shall publish in the autumn, will look at the level and future of the basic state pension. As a result of the announcements that we are making this week as part of the comprehensive spending review, all pensioners—not just those on income support—will be better off. They will not have to pay the cost of their eye tests; they will receive permanent help with winter fuel bills; and they will get concessionary travel.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The Secretary of State will be aware that many British pensioners live overseas, some of them in countries where their pensions have been frozen at the rate that they were receiving when they emigrated. Why has not her review addressed that injustice? Does she recall that the Minister of State, when Chairman of the all-party Select Committee on Social Security, recognised that injustice and recommended that there should be a debate in the House in Government time with a free vote? I believe that that would be a good idea now, so that the 144 people who have signed the early-day motion calling for the unfreezing of those pensions may air their concerns.

Ms Harman: We are aware of the representations that many hon. Members have made. I believe that, bearing in mind the scandal of the very poorest pensioners in this country, about which we have been talking today, the overseas pensioners are unlikely to be a priority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that we must now move on. We have an important debate, in which many hon. Members seek to participate.

NATO Enlargement

Question again proposed, That this House do now adjourn.

11.47 am

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith *rose—*

Mr. Corbyn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman as he is about to speak, but earlier Madam Speaker said that she would refer to the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons the issue of debates such as this. Will you also ensure that the Speaker considers the whole issue of what happens when so much of a debate like this, for which we have waited a year, is taken up with a very important statement? Should not statements be better timetabled?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is a matter to take up directly with the Modernisation Committee.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I agree with what the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) has said. I believe that what we have experienced today represents a gross discourtesy to the House. It certainly interrupted the flow of the debate. Anyway, we shall make the protest at another time.

Before I was interrupted, I was saying that, ever since I can remember, the NATO alliance has been not just a military, but a political, alliance. That probably accounts for the fact that the alliance did not end when the cold war ended. We recognised that there were good reasons—including political reasons—for extending the scope of NATO to fulfil one of its original aims in its preamble: that it should be there to protect democracy in Europe. We also recognised that there were good reasons for extending that remit, after the end of the cold war, into eastern Europe by opening the alliance to European states that wished to join and meet the requirements of membership.

From the beginning, the enlargement process has produced differences of opinion. Some of those opinions have already been expressed during the debate. The differences have emerged in debates of the NATO parliamentary assembly that I have attended. The American Government's influence on the other Governments and in debates in the assembly has persuaded most people to look favourably on the principle of enlargement. There is nothing new about enlargement. NATO has been enlarged before, when Germany, Spain, Portugal and Turkey joined the founder members. The development came as no surprise and was affirmed in July last year by the NATO Governments, who said:

"A new NATO is developing; a new NATO for a new and undivided Europe."

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary emerged from the pack as the principal contenders for entry to NATO. All three suffered dreadfully at the hands of the Nazi and communist dictatorships. Before and after the war, the west did nothing to help them in their moments of distress. I have taken a positive view about the inclusion of those countries, because refusing their request for membership would have been a dreadful act of insensitivity.

Mr. Brzezinski, a distinguished former adviser to a President of the United States, once said:

"The expansion of NATO is an important milestone in European history. It is an important step forward in that unique relationship that binds America and Europe together. It expands the role of the alliance from an alliance that has defended freedom and deterred war to an alliance that promotes the scope of freedom and enhances peace."

That is a fine sentiment, but it should not stop us from questioning the wisdom of ever more expansion. NATO should be used as a political force to help build a political consensus in Europe, as well as to back up our diplomatic initiatives and political goals with military options.

The prospect of NATO enlargement has already given central Europe greater stability. It has helped to strengthen democratic procedures and settle border and other disputes. The NATO-Ukraine pact is one example. There has been no opposition to enlargement from Ukraine. Poland has already created a joint peacekeeping battalion with its neighbour Ukraine and with Lithuania.

However, it is reasonable to ask whether expansion can go on without undermining the cohesion of the alliance and playing into the hands of Russian nationalists. On the other hand, can we or should we risk disappointing those countries that contend that they should not be excluded if the Visegrad countries can join? It is difficult to give a precise answer to such questions from countries known to be keen on joining NATO.

Since NATO accepted the idea of enlargement, certain events have moved the argument further than was originally envisaged. Those events should cause us to pause and reflect. The development of "Partnership for Peace" has fundamentally changed our attitude towards co-operation between the nations of western, central and eastern Europe. When "Partnership for Peace" was first raised, it was described as a "policy for procrastination". It was regarded as a tool or a sop to defer enlargement. Its recent progress has been substantial. It has had impressive success and achieved a momentum in military exercises in which the UK and other western NATO countries have participated. It has also given non-NATO countries opportunities to work with NATO in military exercises, helping to strengthen democratic control over their armed forces. We had feared that, when the cold war ended, democratic practices, particularly democratic control of the armed forces, might not be introduced.

The establishment of the new co-operative arrangements, such as the Euro-Atlantic partnership, will also provide new possibilities for closer dialogue on a broad range of political and security-related issues in Europe. Then there is the NATO-Russian Founding Act, signed on 27 May this year in Paris, which provides a unique framework for improving relations between NATO and Russia on a new basis of partnership and co-operation.

The hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) said in his excellent speech that Russian officers can be seen swanning around NATO headquarters. They are obviously enjoying themselves, not feeling shut out from anything. They can get hold of all the relevant information that anyone needs to know about NATO. We have taken that on trust, but we have agreement from the Secretary-General of NATO to go into the HQ. We want to assure our Russian friends that, as democrats, we do not just take for granted what the Executive tells us; we go and see for ourselves. When we have reported back to the NATO parliamentary assembly, we shall go to Moscow and say what we have seen.

Mr. Colvin: The Russians are not privy to discussions about article 5 issues.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: That is a fair point. There is some concern about how far article 5 protection should be extended to those states that seek membership. That is an important issue. If they join NATO, they will expect that we would respond to any attack on them. One has to question the wisdom of that protection, particularly to countries close to the Russian border or to other areas of tension. Many initiatives have been drawn up since expansion was first considered, which should encourage the stability and co-operation we seek with the nations of eastern Europe.

Mr. Frank Cook: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that candidates for membership should not be admitted to the alliance unless they are willing and able to engage fully on article 5 issues in relation to other nations?

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: The hon. Gentleman has made a valuable point. I have a high regard for the "Partnership for Peace". I am indebted to a report that the hon. Gentleman submitted to the NATO parliamentary assembly, which went into the issue in detail. He showed how convincing a system it is for ensuring that those nations feel more protected, not more vulnerable, and enjoy the benefits of closer co-operation with NATO. Asking them to take article 5 on board is a serious step, which we cannot impose in the immediate future.

That is why I ask for a pause in the examination of which nations we should allow to join NATO and which we should encourage. Nothing is more devastating to people than to be told, "Don't worry; spend a little more money, hold a conference for us and we will ensure that you have a good opportunity—perhaps not next year or the year after, but in five years' time—of joining NATO." To encourage people in such a way provokes dissension in their countries and mistrust of our way of dealing with them; it is not fair to them.

The initiatives that I have mentioned have permitted central and eastern Europe to participate in a wider range of NATO activities. In so doing, membership of NATO has become less urgent—indeed, for some countries, unnecessary. It would therefore be wise not to encourage those involved in "Partnership for Peace" to believe that it provides a passport to NATO. It should not necessarily do so. For that reason and others, further expansion of NATO should be treated with caution.

11.58 am

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith)—not that I follow his politics. I follow him more in friendship. We have shared quite a few exchanges in defence debates over the years. I have been a Member of the House for more than 15 years and have taken part in quite a number of defence debates. Some might say that my contributions have been mediocre, but I hope that today's might be more helpful to the House.

[Mr. Frank Cook]

As a delegate to the North Atlantic Assembly—NATO's parliament—I am vice-chairman of its defence and security committee, and its special rapporteur on reform of Russian forces, for which I must consult and work with a Russian general and two senior members of the Duma. As the right hon. Member for Wealden said, I am the author of the assembly's report on "Partnership for Peace". Therefore, I hope that my comments will be helpful in filling out some of the structures laid before us.

If I had been consulted on NATO 25 years ago, it would have been apparent that I was an ardent opponent of it. Indeed, I was a passionate advocate of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the organisation. Today, of course, I am a firm supporter. As I have said more than once in the House, if it did not exist we would have to invent it.

What have I learnt that has made me change my mind? I suppose that I must start by saying that NATO has always been a thoroughly defensive alliance. It was formed as a defensive organisation in response to fears of a threat from the east. The offensiveness of its character—it was offensive in part—was purely economic. Its existence and activity compelled the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact satellite states to commit very scarce resources to arms production rather than industrial development and infrastructural schemes.

However, NATO proved its unthreatening posture when, as the cold war began to thaw, western analysts began to postulate and propagate the principles of inoffensive defence. They began to promote the ideas of exchanging details of force structures and deployment so that the opposite side would understand, if not agree, that the configuration and deployment of such forces were thoroughly defensive rather than threatening. That was a major change in climate.

Such a change proved to be welcome in the Soviet Union, as it began to admit more openly what it had acknowledged privately for several years: it could not sensibly afford the continuing madness of a Gadarene arms race. Indeed, the United States of America came to the same conclusion at about the same time. The House will recall that President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev admitted as much jointly at their meetings in Reykjavik.

However, easement of the bipolar conflict following Mikhail Gorbachev's declaration that his secret weapon was that he could deprive the west of its enemy has been only partial. It is true that the wall has come down, trade links are being developed and there are even joint ventures in arms production—although small. A burgeoning democratic pluralism is evident in central and eastern Europe and in the Russian Federation, and civilian control of the military is improving steadily.

Mr. Corbyn: Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that, on the break-up of the Soviet Union, NATO member states might have done better to heed Mr. Gorbachev's words about wanting a better European home? Does he agree that they could have looked to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe as a base for future European co-operation and security rather than to the expansion of NATO up to the Russian borders, which puts pressure on the Russian military and encourages it?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend's intervention pre-empts some of my comments. I remind him that the European home has not been forgotten. The OSCE consists of 55 nations. It is top heavy and does not have many resources, apart from its archival filing cabinets and the intellectual initiatives of its diplomats and observers. It does not have the resources of NATO, which has been proved over a couple of generations and is structured to provide the architecture for common, collective European security.

I have said that there have been some improvements since the thaw in the cold war. However, there is a long way to go. There are still blocks of strong doubt and great mistrust. There is great mistrust between the Russian Federation and the west, and even more mistrust between the Russian Federation and its previous satellite allies. Ironically, NATO is proving to be the most effective single instrument in removing the doubts and building the missing confidence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, gave some examples of how NATO is building confidence. It is slowly and surely changing its declared aims and processes, engaging in a liberal application of its globally acknowledged planning resource, and making use of its integrated military command structure. It is also employing its exchange training programme and its "Partnership for Peace" programme.

One of the disadvantages of the exchange training programme is that, at least until recently, Russian officers who returned to the former Soviet Union after attending military academies in the west were consigned to command posts towards Siberia. It is thought that some of the senior Russian military suspect some contamination of those who have been trained in western establishments. That is sad, but the problem is easing.

Article 5 of the treaty commits member states to enter armed conflict in defence of other full member nations. At the moment, 16 nations are so committed, but, after ratification of the protocols, there may be a further three. In Hamburg in 1998, I was proud to move a resolution in the political committee of the North Atlantic Assembly that Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic be admitted to the assembly as observer nations. That was not to every nation's liking. The French referred to me as an imbecile. They may have been right and that may still be true, but the motion won the day and, within 12 months of its acceptance by the political committee, at the assembly in Rome, Vladimir Lobov was on one side of the defence and security committee and, I think, Bernard Rogers was on the other. The meeting was chaired by the right hon. Member for Wealden. All that happened in 12 months—it was very sudden.

Article 4 of the treaty commits members to a form of operational crisis management and peacekeeping, not involving outright armed conflict. NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme offers nations an opportunity to improve and enhance their capacity to co-operate effectively with NATO members in those international peacekeeping operations. Each partner for peace can pick its own profile and work towards it at its own pace as it qualifies for that co-operation.

The effectiveness of that programme can be seen in Bosnia, where every informed military analyst would assert that there could not have been a successful operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina had it not been for the previous work done through the programme. We have

heard about the co-operation between the Russians and the Americans under American direct control, and several hon. Members have seen that in visits to Tuzla.

The "Partnership for Peace" programme has 27 signatory nations. The present candidates for membership—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—are signatory nations, and could be called "gonna-bes". A number of other countries, such as Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, would like to join the alliance, but are in limbo. Nevertheless, they are active within the partnership programme. They could be called "wanna-bes".

There are other signatory nations within the partnership programme, including Finland and Sweden, who are fiercely protective of their declared neutrality. They want to take an active role in the creation of a collective European security architecture, but they do not want to do it on a declared basis. We are lucky to have nations of that calibre and expertise.

Finland and Sweden have a particular history. Each stood out against the former Soviet Union when it was at its most threatening. Both nations won—one more than once. Their relationship with the Russian Federation is based on respect. The Russian Federation respects them, and they respect the Russian Federation.

Finland and Sweden have a measure of confidence in their relationship with the west. There is also a large measure of confidence—because of their historical example—between them and the previous satellite states. They serve a useful purpose in working on the block of mistrust between the Russian Federation and the west, and the even larger block between the former satellite states and the Russian Federation. We must cultivate and encourage the continuation of that relationship.

We have heard about the prospect of the Russian Federation adopting its old outlook. The Russians are not unaware of that, and understand it just as much as people on the centre and centre-left in Germany worry about the far right in that country. The Russians are afraid also of a return to totalitarianism. One has only to consider the news from Russia. The good news is that Lenin's mother is alive; the bad news is that she is pregnant. The Russians make a jest of their past, but they are fully aware of it. They joke seriously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) rightly spoke of the danger that Russia may become antagonised and alienated. I promise him that we are fully alert to that. I believe that we should embrace the Russian Federation, as it has a unique experience and talent. It may have led the Warsaw pact unsuccessfully, but the threat was big enough to worry us for many years.

We have an opportunity to allow article 5 nations to focus around the United States of America, as we do now for article 5 actions, and to allow the "Partnership for Peace" nations, which are not full members of the alliance, to concentrate on article 4 operations—the crisis management and peacekeeping—using Russia as a focal point. The two bodies could act as drayhorses in a common harness, pulling European security in the same direction. Ironically, Russia cannot afford to adopt that leading role, because the arms race left its economic structures in such a terrible mess. None the less, I believe that we should give Russia a more active role in the partnership programme.

Another obstruction to Russian confidence is our failure to make progress on the review of the conventional forces in Europe treaty. Most alliance member states have reduced their force structures and deployment to levels that are way below those set out in the treaty.

Mr. Tyrie: The hon. Gentleman suggests that the arms race destroyed the Soviet economy, but, because of the failure of state planning, the whole economic system would have collapsed regardless of whether it was designed to make weapons—that is what led to the current malaise in the Russian economy.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is looking at the same thing from a different angle. Because Russia was compelled to take part in an arms race—which was just as deleterious for the United States, except that the Americans had greater resources—and consigned so much of its effort into arms production, it was not able to develop sufficiently rapidly to take care of its social structures. He and I are saying the same thing, and I do not understand his intervention. Perhaps I did not make my point sufficiently plainly, but I hope that it is plain now.

As I said, alliance member states have reduced their forces to the levels determined in the conventional forces in Europe treaty or below. However, those levels were set when Russia had its Warsaw pact allies. The Warsaw pact has collapsed, so there is a huge imbalance. That is a cause of great concern to the Russian Federation, which feels itself—we have been talking about perception—to be outgunned. NATO is in danger of hugely increasing that imbalance by admitting two and half former Warsaw pact nations—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The perception of imbalance in Russia is in danger of getting ever greater, and we must address it urgently if we are to avoid further alarming the Russian Federation.

We will not make any decisions today. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North has expressed dissatisfaction about that, but democracy is not only about decisions: it is about expressing disagreement, disapproval or whatever one feels. We will decide today only whether to adjourn, but we have a valuable opportunity to express our opinions.

Democracy involves the capacity to accommodate disapproval, disagreement and differences of opinion, although that was not evident in the previous Government, and some take the view that it is not over-common in the present Government.

We have an opportunity to comment on the three protocols. If we seek a stronger, broader-based, more effective collective European security architecture, NATO is the only means to achieve it. If we seek a vehicle by which the United Nations can effectively offer appropriate means of giving protective cover to people and nations under threat, NATO is the most experienced and capable organisation, with the necessary resources and commitment.

When enlargement was first discussed, I and one or two of my colleagues were opposed to it in principle—why change a winning team, I thought—but changes in circumstances and in the character of NATO have altered my views. Exchanges with representatives from central and eastern Europe have accelerated that change.

I support paragraph (r) of the summary of conclusions and recommendations in the Select Committee report. To those who say that we cannot afford enlargement, I say

[Mr. Cook]

that we cannot afford not to have it. The broadening and strengthening of a collective European security architecture are essential precursors to developing the state of play that will doubtless be achieved some time after we have departed this life: global governance. The approval of the three protocols will be a small but positive step in that direction.

12.21 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): This important debate should have happened some time ago. I absolutely concur with the view expressed by the hon. Members for Walsall, South (Mr. George) and for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), as well as by many other hon. Members, that our mechanism for dealing with overseas treaties is simply not satisfactory. I made that point to the Leader of the House in an attempt to secure earlier progress on the Ottawa convention and land mines legislation.

Mr. Corbyn: The procedures are not only unsatisfactory but non-existent. Under the royal prerogative, the Government can sign treaties and make war or peace with any country they choose, and Parliament has no say in it whatever. Before we lecture the world about democracy and the mother of Parliaments, we should at the very least bring treaties within the orbit of Parliament.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman makes the point extremely well, and perhaps I was understating the case. I am not given to hyperbole.

Mr. Corbyn: Nor am I.

Mr. Heath: That is something we share.

The mechanism does not work effectively, even when a treaty requires changes in domestic legislation, because of the inevitable delays. I, like other hon. Members, have had the embarrassment of talking to friends from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic who simply cannot understand why Britain appears to have taken a lead on the matter but cannot get the procedures right and give the appropriate support.

Lest I fall into the trap into which Ministers accused the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) of falling, let me make the Liberal Democrat position absolutely plain from the outset. We have supported NATO and we support the new concept of NATO and enlargement to encompass the present three applicants. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) has made it plain on a number of occasions that we see no difficulty in being both Atlanticists and Europeans. The two are not mutually exclusive, and our only concern is that some of the structures within Europe do not sufficiently take account of that fact or enable us to construct the arrangements by which Europe could speak with a strong enough voice in the negotiations.

If this debate had taken place a little while ago, one major question would have been whether NATO should continue. With the changing situation throughout Europe, there were doubts about its role in the security of the European continent. To a large extent, that is a dead argument, because NATO has made the adjustment and has sought a new role. It still makes an important contribution to the concept of the defensible entity that provides enhanced security within Europe and provides stability to areas that have historically been unstable points of tension between powers—not merely the Warsaw pact and modern western Europe but, going further back in time, those areas that have always been areas of difficulty for the continent. Providing stability in such areas is an important role.

NATO is also developing its peacekeeping role, and I agree with the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) that that should be an enhanced role for the United Nations, too. NATO should offer a service, often mediated through the UN. We would go further, and make designated forces regularly available to the UN—not a standing army, but forces that would be available for peacekeeping, but that is a different debate.

The military structures of NATO need to change to allow rapid deployment. That is a downgrading of the normal state of readiness.

Mr. Frank Cook: Will the hon. Gentleman bear in mind, when he talks about rapid reaction deployments, that the shortfall is due not to the military, but to the fact that we do not have rapid reaction politicians?

Mr. Heath: We need both, I am grateful for that intervention, as that is an important point. One of the many difficulties that bedevil any negotiations on a European front is the inability to seek early consensus.

On the questions whether enlargement is possible and desirable, and whether there is a rationale behind it, let me say that this would not be the first enlargement of NATO. Other major enlargements have been mentioned. It has enlarged in the past 10 years with the incorporation of the eastern lander of Germany—part of Germany was on the other side and is now on our side, and its armed forces have had to be incorporated, although we have perhaps not had the same agonies over that decision.

Enlargement has some important ground rules. I would be greatly concerned if it were seen as some sort of second prize for countries that aspire to be members of the European Union, but are not economically ready for the task. That would be a distortion of the intention behind NATO and would not be an appropriate way to deal with the aspirations of the countries of central and eastern Europe. Vice versa, it would be wrong if the EU were considered the short cut to NATO, without having to go through the business of providing support for it, and we must be aware of that. There must be genuine mutual security benefits to both NATO and the applicant countries.

We cannot divorce accession from economic considerations, not only as they relate to control of the armed forces but as they affect the applicant countries which will incur expenditure and will hope to nestle in a security blanket that provides an environment in which economic investment can take place. That is crucial to countries whose fragile economies are trying to grow in a democratic context.

Acceding countries must form part of a defensible area. It makes no sense to incorporate countries that cannot be defended in any real sense. That may preclude some countries that might wish to develop an interest in NATO at some stage.

The Visegrad three—the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary—pass all the tests. They would pass with even greater aplomb if Austria would finally take the tortured decision to end neutrality and join NATO. In Vienna last week, I spoke to senior Austrian politicians and found that great differences of opinion have yet to be resolved, but there are strong advocates of accession to NATO. That would correct the geographical problem that has been referred to. Routes around Slovakia take us around one side, but Austria provides a more direct route of connection for Hungary to the rest of NATO.

All that is important in terms of the points made by the Foreign Secretary. We are discussing mitteleuropa, the core of Europe. At the heart of the European continent, countries share with us many cultural and political aspirations that were submerged for so long by the Russian empire. It is symbolically important that mitteleuropa should rejoin the European family of nations.

Other countries may apply. I have no problem with Slovenia's application, although it is slightly offensive that it appears to have been subject to American veto before reaching the negotiating table. I accept that Slovenia will not make a massive contribution, but it passes all the tests, and I see no reason why it should not eventually join NATO.

Romania has strong advocates among French politicians, who can instantly list all the reasons why it should be a member. That may be based on a slightly odd view that Romania remains Francophone: when one talks to the Romanians one finds that they are not, despite the perception in Paris that Romania forms part of the French sphere of influence. Romania would be a valuable ally. Its democracy is still tentative, but is developing quickly.

The Baltic states are more difficult, because they are inextricably linked with Russia. Other hon. Members have mentioned that we cannot entirely eliminate the Russian view. There can be no Russian veto, and Russia cannot arbitrarily decide with whom we shall do business on defence, in economic terms or in any other sense. No veto, no surprises, must be the right way to deal with Russia.

We should recognise the difficulties that inclusion of the Baltic states would present to Russia. It would mean the encirclement of Kaliningrad, which, as a highly militarily engaged enclave, would be a node of instability. It would worry me if Russia felt that part of its sovereign territory was so encircled in an area where there is high level of military activity. There is a problem. To incorporate the Baltic states while the other Scandinavian countries lie outside NATO might seem an unnecessary provocation. It is not necessarily a good enough reason for not doing it, but it should be considered in examining the benefits.

I do not accept that Russia has some area of influence that we have to respect under all circumstances, and into which we can never intrude, but we must be sensitive to what Russians feel about what is happening near their borders. We should base our decisions on what creates stability and security in Europe rather than on that which does the opposite. That is a proper consideration.

We have another problem with Estonia, which may soon be in the European Union. There are few obstacles to its accession other than those common to all applicant countries. As an EU member, it has virtually automatic membership of the Western European Union. It is a conundrum that will cause us difficulty.

Mr. Jim Marshall: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the possible entry of the Baltic states into the European Union. He said that they would automatically enter the WEU. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will correct that impression. It does not work that way around. It has become a precondition of entry into the WEU that a member state of the European Union must also be a member of NATO. He may argue, as I intend briefly to argue, that we should change that configuration, particularly in the cases of the Baltic states so that their entry into the EU—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. This is a very long intervention. I know that the hon. Gentleman hopes to catch my eye later. Perhaps he could make those points when he does.

Mr. Marshall: I apologise. I hope that it will be sooner rather than later. Perhaps we could alter the rules so that entry into the EU would mean automatic entry into the WEU.

Mr. Heath: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, and he will no doubt expand on it later.

There is the further difficulty with the extension of NATO to Russian borders. It is not a matter of principle that the Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus should not be incorporated, although in the case of Belarus it seems unlikely. It is a matter of identifying the objectives of NATO, how they work in the geopolitical climate of Europe and whether it is anyone's interest to create what might be perceived as a new cold war front along the Russian border. We must consider whether that would create instability where it does not exist.

I want to discuss what is commonly called the architecture of NATO, which is not always a helpful term. A proliferation of pillars bedevil the European Union, and they are beginning to bedevil NATO. I do not like the analogy of two pillars. If architecture is based on two pillars and one becomes weaker, we get a lopsided structure. I prefer to use the term "a twin foundation". We clearly have that with the United States, which is a very important player, and with the states of Europe, which would form a much stronger player than they currently do, were they able to come to a common position.

I believe that we have to have concerns about the position of the United States. One has only to listen to the debates in the Senate and Congress to realise that there are proper concerns that we as Europeans must face about the attitude of United States politicians and their potential attitude in the future. I thought that the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) was exceedingly polite about Jesse Helms, his American colleague, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Such American attitudes are the sort of thing that we in Europe could frankly do without.

It is essential to develop the positive contribution that the European dimension within NATO can provide. We have the European security and defence identity, and combined joint task forces. All those are moves in the right direction, but we are not there yet. I should like to see much more consolidation within Europe—for instance of the defence industries—as that is essential if we are to maintain competitiveness with the Americans. I should like to see the review undertaken by the Secretary of State

[Mr. Heath]

for Defence encompass the European dimension much more overtly. He knows that we have applauded a great deal of what has emerged from the strategic defence review, but what was missing was the view of how that fitted into a wider European context. We should also see an extension of common procurement.

None of the development that has taken place ought to preclude further strengthening of the consultative machinery to which several hon. Members have referred—the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, which is an underdeveloped area of activity. All our Governments should pay a little more attention to CSCE and provide better resources if it is to do its job effectively. We have in it a process for de-escalation of potential tension. That must be the name of the game. We must seek to avoid conflict, rather than having to resolve it once it has arisen. That is an essential component.

The one area that has not been discussed, yet I believe will be essential to European and world politics in the 21st century, is the development of sub-regional organisations. In this sense, "sub-regional" means anything up to half a continent, but it means that people can talk about security, economic and environmental issues that transcend boundaries in the context of a smaller unit that takes people outside the fixed certainties of the blocs and enables them to make quicker progress. We have seen that developing in the Baltic council, the Barents sea, to an extent in the Caspian sea and rather unsuccessfully in the Mediterranean. Those are the areas on which we need to concentrate.

I have not referred yet to the costs of enlargement. As other hon. Members have said, they are terribly difficult to get a grip on in any accurate sense. They are unlikely to be as high as the highest expectations in America or elsewhere. I believe that those expected figures are wrong. We can be sure that the costs will certainly not be as high as the costs of failure in defence in Europe. If we fail to incorporate other countries into NATO and give them reason to develop their armed forces and security machinery outside the envelope of NATO, the costs will inevitably be much higher.

It is important that we do not saddle the applicant countries with inappropriate costs. There is a clear necessity to improve their command structures and their training, but I do not believe that there is an enormous need to improve the military material that they have at their disposal. Enlargement should not be a licence to Lockheed to go hawking its wares around central and eastern Europe. Instead, we should concentrate on the contribution that the applicant countries can make best.

I have taken enough of the House's time, so let me say finally that the Czechs, the Hungarians and the Poles have been waiting for a clear message from the House, as from other Parliaments across Europe. We have a significance as one of the countries that has often taken a lead in these matters and it is a shame that we were not able to do so earlier, but I hope that the message that will go forward from this morning's debate is a clear one.

We accept the protocols that have been laid before us but, more than that, we embrace the countries in central and eastern Europe and we want them to be part of the European family. We believe that they have contributions to make; the contributions will be not entirely one way, as some hon. Members have suggested, but reciprocal. Those countries have a contribution to make to NATO and we look forward to ratification at the earliest opportunity. It has the Liberal Democrats' full support.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should like to point out that many hon. Members want to contribute to the debate. We have already lost quite a lot of time because of the statement, so, unless hon. Members' speeches are brief, many will be disappointed.

12.45 pm

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for not allowing my perhaps over-long intervention on the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) to prejudice your judgment as to who should follow him. I am grateful.

I share the concern expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House about the nature of the ratification process for the protocols and treaties. I hope that the Modernisation Committee, as part of its work on improving the working methods in this place and within Government machinery as a whole, will find some more sensible method of allowing Parliament not only to discuss such matters but to be involved in the decision-making and ratification processes.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have drawn attention to the fact that the debate is a short one, but that is not our fault. I shall try to heed your request, but we were presented with a maximum of four and a half hours for this debate, and three-quarters of an hour disappeared because of a statement. I welcome that statement, but it means that the House will have only three and three quarter hours at most to discuss a crucial issue. That is a message that the Government and their business managers should take to heart.

I do not want to introduce a note of political acrimony into the debate, because there appears to be cross-party support for the measure in hand, but I am slightly disturbed by the attitude of the official Opposition. The Government fielded my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to introduce the debate, and it will be wound up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. But who do we have on the Opposition Front Bench? There is no shadow Foreign Secretary—in fact, the shadow Front-Bench team is a real shadow today. I do not know what urgent business is keeping the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) away from the House, but—

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The time for the debate is limited, and you have previously spoken to the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) about a lengthy intervention. What the hon. Gentleman is talking about is not germane to the debate, and I wondered whether we could get on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for me.

Mr. Marshall: You are quite right, Mr. Deputy Speaker; nor do the hon. Gentleman's remarks have any relevance to the point that I am making.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe

(Mr. Howard) is sorry to be unable to be here today, but he is travelling abroad. From time to time, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence have been unavoidably absent from the House for the same reason, and we quite understand when that happens.

Mr. Marshall: I am grateful for that information. I realise that shadow Ministers, as well as real Ministers, have appointments that they have to keep; however, I pointed out the absence of shadow Ministers today because it shows the degree of importance that the Opposition attach to the subject of our debate. Many of us have important things to be doing elsewhere in the United Kingdom today. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) would prefer to be in his constituency, and I would prefer to be in Leicester. I only wish that the shadow Foreign Secretary were here to speak on behalf of the official Opposition.

Bearing in mind the point made by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), I shall move on to my constructive contribution to the debate. Like many of my hon. Friends, I have often, throughout my adult life, had equivocal feelings towards NATO. I have never been anti-NATO, but I have been more sceptical and critical of it at some times than at others. I have been a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for most of my adult life.

Dr. Julian Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman has been a member of CND for most of his adult life, either he does not realise the implication of that or he is not being fully open with the House. CND's constitution requires the one-sided abandonment by Britain not only of nuclear weapons and nuclear bases but of nuclear alliances. If he has been supporting CND for most of his adult life, he has, like the Foreign Secretary, been supporting withdrawal from NATO and a policy of neutralism, unless NATO gave up all its nuclear weapons, which of course it never had any intention of doing.

Mr. Marshall: As I was saying, I have been a member of CND most of my adult life. One of my criticisms of NATO was its undue emphasis on the possible use of nuclear weapons. I still hold that view, and I do not intend to apologise for that to the House or to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that NATO has been one of the most successful military and political alliances of all times. Fifty years ago, it brought together nation states, many of which were traditional enemies, under the hegemony of the United States. A decade ago, it defeated its enemy without having to resort to physical warfare.

With the end of the cold war and the emergence of pluralistic democracies in central and eastern Europe which are committed to market forces, to respect for human rights and to peacefully settling disputes with neighbours, it was inevitable that NATO's future would be debated in the context of future security arrangements in Europe. In that regard, there are three possible scenarios. The first, which is favoured by some of my hon. Friends, is to disband NATO; the second is to remain an alliance of 16; and the third is to expand, particularly in central and eastern Europe.

The first scenario—the disbandment of NATO—would lead to the withdrawal of the United States of America from Europe, and to Europeans making the decisions and taking any necessary action to protect European security interests. Events in Bosnia, later in Albania and currently in Kosovo have shown clearly the inability of European states to act in concert to deal with their own problems without the political involvement and leadership of the United States. Events on the ground in Bosnia, through the actions of NATO, have shown the value of NATO planning and the integrated command structure.

That leads me to two inevitable conclusions. First, there is a need to maintain the involvement of the United States in European security through the proven structure of NATO. Secondly, it demonstrates the efficacy of NATO as a military machine.

The second scenario—to remain an alliance of 16—has received publicity in recent weeks, which is a bit late in the day to contribute to the debate. One of its supporters is my noble Friend Lord Healey. Advocates of this position argue that there should be no expansion because the alliance would become too unwieldy and would therefore be unable to deal with the delicate political problems that are likely to occur on the military map in the next century. Their basic argument is that consensus among 16 is difficult enough, and that that situation would be an order of magnitude worse if there were 19-plus members of NATO. They also argue that it would adversely affect relations with Russia.

I believe that NATO remaining an alliance of 16 would ignore political reality in Europe. There is no doubt that the end of the cold war created in central and eastern Europe a vacuum waiting to be filled either by a volatile Russia or by the western democracies. In that regard, it is interesting to note that the three countries invited to join NATO—Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic—and other applicant countries want to join NATO and the European Union because those organisations are seen to have contributed to the peace and prosperity of their member states over the past 15 years. It would be a grave strategic error to bar them from admittance to NATO because of possible future difficulties resulting from increasing the size of NATO.

For Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, NATO membership could well have a positive outcome. In respect of relations with Russia, there is a real prospect that NATO's expansion will prompt a genuine reconciliation between the Russians and their central European neighbours. Once in NATO, the central Europeans will no longer fear that their closeness to Russia can lead to a mortal embrace—a fear that is undoubtedly deeply rooted in painful historical experience.

On that basis, I welcome the admission of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to NATO. As I said in an earlier intervention—not one to which you were privy, Mr. Deputy Speaker—it is right that the current round of enlargement is based more on political considerations than on purely defence-related calculation, as I believe political considerations are paramount.

Despite what we may hear from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, it is generally accepted that the three candidate countries will not be able to make a proportionate contribution to NATO for at least another decade. However, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said, we should not forget that those three countries are prepared to pay the price of membership of NATO and of European Union membership, for which

[Mr. Marshall]

they have also applied, in terms of accepting the acquis of the European Union. We could not have a surer indication of the value of those institutions to those three countries and to others than the economic price that they are prepared to pay in defence expenditure and in public expenditure to bring their social and environmental infrastructure up to scratch to join the European Union.

Finally, we must have regard to countries that are unsuccessful in their applications, and make it clear to them that enlargement of NATO is an open exercise and will not be closed. We have to make it clear, particularly to central and eastern European countries, that they will be part of the next enlargement within the next decade to 15 years if they can meet the minimum requirements for NATO membership. It would be foolish to close the door to those countries permanently; that way lies future instability. We must ensure that there is a continuum allowing them to move toward membership of NATO in the foreseeable, rather than the distant, future.

As I said when I intervened on the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, I share the concern about the Baltic states. There are grave dangers in encouraging them to believe that membership of NATO is on the immediate horizon. It would be unfair to allow them to believe that. It would create instability in that part of northern Europe around the Baltic.

I favour the solution proposed by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome—that the best way for those countries to get into the European security architecture is via membership of the European Union. Despite what we say about the European Union and defence, the European Union has an indirect security context. No one could persuade me that, if a member state of the European Union was attacked by any foreign country, we would not go to that member state's assistance. There is therefore an implicit security guarantee in membership, which I believe we should encourage the Baltic states to accept.

As I said in response to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, I believe that we must alter the configuration between the European Union, the Western European Union and NATO, so that member states of the European Union that are not members of NATO have the right to join the WEU. That would not only solve the problem of the Baltic states, but cover the case of Slovenia, which is likely to be accepted into the European Union at the next enlargement, and which is keen to join NATO.

In our relationship with Russia, we must ensure continuing close co-operation and consultation through the Permanent Joint Council of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, but obviously there must be no veto. Finally, I believe that we must try to make it evidently and credibly clear to the Russians that the expansion of NATO and the expansion of the European Union are open-ended historical processes, without fixed geographical or time limits, and that, eventually, a more formal association with both is on Russia's political horizon.

1.1 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): This has been a consensual debate. No contributor to it has opposed the entry to NATO of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and I confirm that I support that. The debate has been consensual as between Labour and Conservative Members. The admission of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland is consensual, accepted by the United States and Russia. However, that consensual attitude– that harmony—has not always existed.

When I trained as a pilot, 40 years ago, the wing commander in charge of flying called in the newly training pilots and told us, "At this moment, in the Soviet union, a young pilot will be starting his training today, and one day you may meet him above the skies of central Europe. If he is better trained than you, he will kill you." That was the atmosphere in which my generation grew up. We believed that there might be a war, and we were prepared to fight in it.

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were a difficult period, and not a consensual one. Many of us fought the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Labour party conference after Labour party conference passed resolutions demanding the abolition of nuclear weapons. I was chairman of an organisation called the Campaign for Defence and Multilateral Disarmament. We tried to tie CND's shoe-laces together, with some success. We fought things such as the Lambeth nuclear-free zone. We watched Michael Foot march to Aldermaston. There were organisations such as socialists against the bomb and scientists against the bomb, and various fellow travellers. I once received a missive from an organisation calling itself Streatham lesbian dentists against the bomb—I am still not sure whether that was meant to be serious. It was a period when there was absolutely no consensual attitude.

The security and safety of this country owes nothing to the Labour party at that time. It took Margaret Thatcher's support for President Reagan in the deployment of cruise missiles at Greenham Common to face down the expansion of the Russian and Warsaw pact missile programme. Fortunately, history will not say what would have happened had we had a Labour Government at that time. No Labour Government would have given President Reagan the support that the Americans needed to face down the Warsaw pact. That was a period of triumph for us, and I am proud that we were there. I have mentioned the Labour party, but the Liberals were even worse. Woolly of clothing and of mind, they were even more firmly in favour of CND, if that is possible, than was the Labour party.

I am questioning not the patriotism of the Labour party or the Liberals, but their judgment. Their judgment was wrong: thank God we had a Conservative Government to support NATO.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): The hon. Gentleman has given a list of dirty tricks that the Conservatives used to undermine CND—an organisation that reflected the will of the majority of the population, who were worried about nuclear war after the Cuban missile crisis. The Conservatives seem to have no policies and are useless at reflecting what people need. Are they going to employ such dirty tricks to try to undermine the Labour Government?

Mr. Viggers: That is unfair of the hon. Gentleman, who should know me well enough to realise that I would not engage in dirty tricks. I went round the United Kingdom, going to universities, colleges and open meetings. I debated several times with Monsignor Bruce Kent and put forward the argument for nuclear weapons.

which was unpopular in many circles, although most of the population believed in their retention. CND had to be fought. That was a difficult period, when we were seriously concerned that CND would undermine the defence of the country. I am proud that we fought that battle and won it on intellectual grounds.

Dr. Julian Lewis *rose—*

Mr. Viggers: I am sorry, but I cannot give way because there are too many people waiting to speak.

NATO was created to counter-balance the Warsaw pact. It was a military and political alliance—both aspects were important. NATO brings United States and Canadian military force and political support to Europe. NATO has always had some weak points. Some years ago, I travelled around NATO countries. In Greece we were given a presentation on "the threat". We were surprised that a map of Turkey was put up when the threat was mentioned. Some members of NATO have always been stronger and more allied than others. Some of our allies have armed forces far weaker than ours.

There has been some discussion about whether NATO was required and whether the Western European Union could make NATO less relevant. That argument is in the past. The thrust is for mutually reinforcing institutions. We have the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and "Partnership for Peace", which has 27 members and has been exceptionally successful in promoting understanding and the use of military facilities between different countries, not all of which are or, wish to be, members of NATO. It is vital that NATO should retain its core value and its ability to fight a high-intensity war.

The concept of NATO expansion is not new: Greece and Turkey joined in 1952; the Federal Republic of Germany joined in 1955; Spain joined in 1982; and, more recently, eastern Germany has joined. Why expand now? The motor for expansion is the United States of America. It is worth remembering that only 7 per cent. of Americans have travelled abroad and that 40 per cent. of Congressmen do not even possess a passport.

All those people had to come from somewhere. As we have seen, the Irish in America tend to become more Irish the longer they are there. There is a strong feeling among the American people that the nations from which their ancestors came should not be deprived of the benefit of NATO membership. There has also been a rapturous response in central and eastern Europe, where membership of NATO is seen as a western credential and a way of joining prosperous western nations as well as enjoying NATO's support in defence.

I have been agnostic about the expansion of NATO. I am not at all sure that we should expand too fast. My doubts are focused on three main areas. First, several central and eastern European countries have very insecure foundations as democracies. I was recently briefed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington. It is not for nothing that the FBI has a special division which deals with countries which are, effectively, controlled by organised crime. Several of them, including those whose names have been mentioned in this debate as candidates for NATO, have extremely insecure foundations as democracies. In some of their elections, their Members of Parliament have been accepted as having strong links with organised crime. We must be careful that countries that are admitted to NATO are true and secure democracies.

My second argument for being cautious about NATO expansion concerns the costs of defence of countries that are admitted. That is a respectable doubt for a person to have; Lord Healey has been mentioned as one such person. An article last year in *Defense News* referred to 46 people who came together to write a letter to the President of the United States on the matter. They included former Senator Sam Nunn, two former ambassadors to Moscow, a former ambassador to Poland, a former Under-Secretary and a former NATO Assistant Secretary-General, all of whom argued:

"Instead of expanding . . . NATO should boost its Partnership for Peace program, which aids nonmembers in military training and helps Eastern and Central Europeans join the European Union."

Much of the expenditure on defence could be better spent on improving economics. Having said that, I reiterate that I do not oppose Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joining NATO. I just feel that we should be cautious about expanding still further.

My third main reason for being cautious about NATO expansion is the attitude in Russia. I am saying this not because I am afraid of Russia but because I think that we have stronger links, through the Founding Act of 1997, at presidential and governmental level with Russia than we have at parliamentary and people level. No one who has seen—as I have—a Duma packed with people who are seriously concerned that the expansion of NATO will cause instability in Russia can doubt that that needs to be taken seriously. We need to build on and expand the Founding Act, which states that one of its purposes is to improve public awareness of relationships between countries.

Most changes in the former Soviet Union have been greatly for the better, but in Russia in particular there has been seismic shock. Communism is—was—a way of life; it is virtually a religion. The people have lost not only the illusion of military might but their faith. The nearest parallel I can think of is this: it is as if the Vatican had been told that God did not exist and that the Roman Catholic Church was a myth, corrupt and incapable.

The people of Russia are baffled, disillusioned and angry that their faith has been taken from them. More than half the members of the state Duma have signed a resolution stating that expansion of NATO will create new dividing lines and barriers in Europe. The question that has always been asked in Russia is against whom NATO is expanding. Instability in Russia is not surprising, bearing in mind the arrears of pay and appalling housing conditions in the armed forces. We hear that even officers and their families are living in tents.

Russia and the Warsaw pact countries had military-industrial combines and much employment depended on military and industrial expenditure in military areas. A month ago, the Pentagon told me that, in 90 cities in the former Soviet Union, more than 75 per cent. of the population work in the defence industry. Think of that industry being undermined and people realising that they are losing their former markets—the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary—because those three countries and others will re-equip with NATO-compatible equipment.

The NATO-Russian framework is sound at Government level, but it needs to be broadened and strengthened. One way to do that is to have Russian delegates at our North Atlantic Assembly meetings. It is surprising to me that I am on conversational terms with Mr. Zhirinovsky. I have had several conversations with

[Mr. Viggers]

him and have chaired meetings at which he spoke. We have experienced the calming and reassuring influence of personal contact with people from the former Soviet Union countries and from Russia.

There should be more military contacts between NATO and Russia, and I welcome the fact that there are now Russians in Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. The "Partnership for Peace" programme has been an outstanding success in promoting a sense of common purpose in defence-related activity of all kinds, including even air traffic control. Russia is losing markets in former Soviet Union countries, and we must seriously face the loss of business and currency to Russia. If currency does not enter Russia, reform may not happen.

How can we co-operate? I shall put to the House a thought that may seem eccentric. It is that the former Soviet Union, and in particular Ukraine, has the Antonov aircraft factory, which is without orders. It manufactures aircraft that are similar to those that are contained in plans for the future large aircraft. I welcome the fact that the Germans are seeking to co-operate with the Antonov factory, and regret that no other NATO country seems to want to co-operate with Antonov, which has a world leader in the field. Similarly, the Mig 29 Fulcrum and the Sukhoi 35 have airframes which, as far as I can see, are far superior to any in the west. I regret that we have not found ways to co-operate with Russia or to pass orders to it to demonstrate that the confidence that we express in the expansion of NATO does not mean that we are seeking to do it down.

As the Foreign Secretary said, the expansion of NATO involvesa geographical expansion of one sixth of territory and a borders expansion of one third. That is a large expansion. I would resist further expansion in the foreseeable future, and I would avoid a timetable for further expansion. Meanwhile, we must retain the core role of NATO and its ability, if necessary, to engage in high-intensity warfare.

1.17 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I am vehemently opposed to the expansion of NATO. When occupants of both Front Benches are united, they are sometimes united in error. In view of what the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) said, I should like to place on record the names of those who share the view that expansion is a folly of historic proportions. They are Ken Aldred, the director of the Council for Arms Control; Sir Michael Atiyah, the President of the Royal Society; Sir Hugh Beach; Sir Michael Beetham; Frank Blackaby; Field Marshal The Lord Bramall and Field Marshal The Lord Carver; Sir Frank Cooper, the former permanent under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence; Sir John Curtiss; Sir James Eberle, who ran Chatham House; John Edmonds, the former ambassador to the comprehensive test ban treaty; Sir Stephen Egerton and Sir John Graham, former ambassadors; Dr. Helga Graham, who put the letter together; Hugh Hanning; Lord Healey; Sir Michael Howard; Sir Arthur Hockaday; Lord Kennet; Sir John Killick; Sir Ian McGeoch; Sir Harry Tuza and Mrs. Elizabeth Young. They are not exactly CND marchers. They say:

"Our misgivings are manifold, but what lies at their heart is the vital need to preserve NATO's ability, in the new Europe where, by common consent, potential threats to the peace are diffuse and unpredictable, to make rapid assessments and take quick and effective decisions on what action, if any, to take. This is difficult enough with 16 members, as the Bosnian experience as shown; with more it risks becoming impossibly slow and ineffective."

There are other disturbing implications:

"Actual and potential arms control and arms reduction agreements, both nuclear and conventional, will be more complicated and difficult; their ratification and implementation may be jeopardised . . . The security threat to those states not admitted in the first wave is liable to be increased; yet it is they, the Baltic states for example, who are already the most vulnerable. On the other hand, we fail to identify any countervailing advantages for the Alliance in enlargement. It will therefore continue to antagonise Russia for no good reason."

I hope that the Defence Secretary will give a serious answer to those distinguished people. I hope he will answer another question. I do not think that I do the Foreign Secretary an injustice in saying that he implied that, somehow or other, what we are doing was okay by the Russians. That is not their view.

Dr. Alexei Arbatov—whom some of us have met at Labour party groups and, doubtless, Conservative groups—of the Russian state Duma has said:

"First the enforced reconcentration on strategic nuclear forces is ruinous to our [economic] development. Second, our need to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the Western military regions of the country and in the Northern fleet damages our prospects significantly. Thirdly, there is the need to expand anti-missile defences at great expense in European Russia. And fourth, the increased vulnerability of Russian strategic nuclear bases and conventional forces means increased defence commitments and expenditure."

Dr. Arbatov concluded by complaining that one third of the west's military power in Europe is close to Russia's land frontiers, and that historical hostility to Russia is part of the policy and attitudes of some of the new countries.

We are assured that the NATO-Russian Founding Act establishes the framework for co-operation between NATO and Russia and creates the foundation for a lasting friendship, yet arguably, the 10 conditions imposed recently on US ratification of NATO enlargement by the ultra-conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms, according to the Russians,

"guts this incipient co-operation of any realistic content and revives the spirit of the Cold War."

What are the facts of the matter? What are the Russians saying to us? In particular what are they saying about the Helms conditions? As I understand it, the Helms conditions have created considerable worry in the Russian Duma. The conditions are:

"1. Outline a clear, complete strategic rationale for NATO expansion.

2. Agree that no limitations will be placed on the numbers of NATO troops or types of weapons to be deployed on the territory of new member states, including nuclear weapons.

3. Explicitly reject Russian efforts to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone in central Europe.

4. Explicitly reject all efforts to tie NATO decisions to UN Security Council Approval.

5. Establish a clear delineation of NATO deliberations that are off-limits to Russia, including, but not limited to arms control, further Alliance expansion, procurement and strategic doctrine.

6. Provide an immediate seat at the NATO table for countries invited to join the Alliance.

7. Reject Russian efforts to require NATO aid for Russian arms sales to former Warsaw Pact militaries joining the Alliance . . .

8. Reject any further Russian efforts to link consensus in arms-control negotiations including the . . . ABM treaty and the CFE treaty.

9. Develop a plan for a NATO ballistic missile defence system to defend Europe.

10. Get a clear advance agreement on an equitable distribution of the cost of expansion, to make certain American taxpayers don't get stuck with the lion's share of the bill."

What is the attitude to those conditions? Any foreseeable Russian Government must surely deeply resent them.

The worries are not only British, but American. I shall spare the House the list of the American signatories to a letter to President Clinton, but the fact that it includes people such as Nitze shows that there is at least a queasy attitude to what we are doing. I believe that we are unnecessarily alienating and isolating Russia. Such vindictive handling will encourage revanchism; a genuine comparison can be made to Weimar Germany in what we are doing to the fragile and flawed democracy of current Russian politics.

Enlargement along the lines that are proposed will be counter-productive. It will undermine the efforts of the reformers in Russia and support the rise to power of reactionaries, whether of the communist left or the authoritarian right. Even in the short term, the alienation of Russia may remove its incentive to co-operate with the west in other areas of international affairs, such as the non-proliferation and nuclear arms control treaties.

The START 2 agreement on nuclear arms reduction, which was signed in 1993, has not come into force because of the Duma's refusal to approve it.

What is the assessment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State of the likely effect of enlargement on START 2? Until the situation is resolved, there will be no movement on further START negotiations. Indeed, Russia has revealed that, until funds are found to modernise its armed forces, it will place a greater onus on its nuclear arsenal in its defence strategy. In February 1998, the Duma passed a motion calling NATO enlargement the biggest threat to Russia since the end of the second world war.

Elsewhere, Russia has followed policies that are not consonant with those of the US and Britain, notably on the treatment of Serbia, and particularly on Kosovo. If we want Russia to co-operate on such delicate matters, is it really wise to provoke it?

We must also consider the interests of the applicant states. As envisaged, NATO will never be able to achieve the consolidation of a peaceful and undivided Europe unless Russia—a European country—is made a full member of the alliance, which is most unlikely. Dangerous military or psychological imbalances could occur between those countries that are in and those that are out. New members, such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, will have access to military communications and nuclear intelligence that regional neighbours such as Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria will be denied.

That is a difficult situation. Senator Moynihan pointed out that, if the Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, which are panting for membership, were brought in, the United States and other signatories would have a solemn obligation to defend territory further east than the westernmost border of Russia. Is that wise?

Sam Nunn, who has been mentioned, said:

"Russian co-operation in avoiding proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is our most important national security objective".

He pointed out that NATO expansion makes the Russians "more suspicious and less co-operative".

When Mr. Gorbachev was directly approached by Sir Hugh Beach, Dr. Graham and Sir John Killick, he said:

"In 1990 I was assured by, among others, Chancellor Kohl and the then US Secretary of State James Baker that there were no plans for the expansion of NATO Eastwards and that there would not be any. Of this we have documentary evidence. James Baker, in particular said to me on 9 February 1990: 'We understand that, not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries, it is important to have guarantees that, if the US, in the framework of NATO, maintains its presence in Germany, that will not lead to the extension of the jurisdiction or the military presence of NATO by one inch Eastwards.'"

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dalyell: Forgive me. I am rushing through my speech, because so many hon. Members want to speak.

The expansion of NATO means Russia relying more and more on nuclear weapons. It is NATO's hope that co-operation under the Founding Act, and especially joint operational experience of peacekeeping, will help to dispel Russian mistrust of NATO and its enlargement, but the existing member states should not be deluded about the extent of the psychological trauma suffered by the Russian political elite as a result of the collapse of the Soviet empire. We really had better be careful about what we are doing.

What is the likely cost of equipping central European countries for NATO membership? What proportion are they supposed to pay, and what would be the effect on, for example, the Polish economy? What will it cost to make central European weapons systems compatible with those of NATO?

The Pentagon recently came up with a new estimate of the cost, at $1.5 billion over 10 years, but the *New York Times* said that the figure was laughable, and clearly cooked up to reassure the Senate as it approached a vote. Only a few months ago, the Pentagon calculated that the cost could run as high as $35 billion over 13 years. One is entitled to ask what costs are involved.

The entry of the Baltics would create huge problems in Moscow. NATO expansion may damage paramount security interests for decades to come. The American President and the British Government may mistake Yeltsin's seeming acquiescence for permanent Russian acceptance. Other Governments will come along in Russia, and they may not acquiesce.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said, the whole American plan seems to be at the expense of the United Nations. Why cannot the UN be involved? It is not clever to give grave offence to a weakened Russian state. We are encouraging the slow candle of Russian nationalism. I beg those on both Front Benches to be careful.

1.32 pm

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): I am tempted to follow some of the thoughts of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), but I will resist. I am amazed that so many

[Mr. Michael Colvin]

intelligent, well-informed and experienced people could put their names to the documents that he told us about. Much of what he and other hon. Members have said today rests on how Russia will respond to NATO enlargement, which I welcome, but with caution, as expressed in the Select Committee's third report.

The House may have overlooked Russia's capability to mount a military reaction to enlargement. There is concern about Russia's economy and internal politics. There is a danger of that enormous country, with all its human and natural resources, imploding. A reactionary leader might then be tempted to go on an external adventure.

Following what my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) said, one has to ask oneself how quickly Russia could tool up for war. At present, its armed forces are totally demoralised—most of them are unpaid and there is massive desertion—and if it made any attempt to tool up for a military adventure, the west would get so much warning that we would be able to respond and, I think, deter any aggression. That is what deterrence is all about. Also, before Russia went on any external adventure via its front door, it would have to bear in mind the 3,500 miles of its back door, which is the People's Republic of China all the way along.

There has been much discussion of enlargement of the European Union as well as of NATO, and the two have a certain synergy. If I were from a central or eastern European country, in terms of security I would far rather go for membership of the EU than of NATO, because achieving comparability with the other NATO member countries and interoperability with their weapons would impose considerable costs. Implicit within membership of the European Union is a mutual security obligation. It is inconceivable that, if any member state were attacked, it would not expect other EU members to come to its assistance.

Much has been said about membership of the Western European Union. However, the Brussels and Washington treaties both contain a fifth article—the mutual security article—so it is inconceivable that any country joining the EU that qualified to join the WEU would not also qualify to join NATO. The Select Committee on Defence has always pointed out that a European country cannot belong to one without belonging to the other.

Another important point is that the EU will enhance trade. In 1975, when we were debating Britain's continued membership of what was then the European Economic Community, a history master in Andover told me that to him the matter was simple. He said, "Where you trade, you have peace, and when trade breaks down, you often have war." My advice to the countries of central and eastern Europe that are concerned and disappointed about the lack of a quicker way to join NATO is to concentrate on achieving EU membership and on maintaining and enhancing the trading links that they had with Russia when they were part of the Soviet Union.

It is time that NATO redefined its mission. For example, at the moment it is geographically restrained—its southern flank is the north coastline of north Africa. We must understand that the world security situation is now completely different. Gone is the stability of the cold war, and the loss of cohesion means that everyone is much freer. All sorts of new problems now face us.

For instance, a crescent of crisis stretches from the Caspian sea right across the southern flank of NATO, following the fault line between Christian and Muslim communities. In the north African states, there is much fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. By undermining the economies of those countries, the terrorists are sowing the seeds of the sort of problems that could well harm the soft underbelly of the EU and NATO. Therefore, NATO must rethink its strategic concept, which was first drawn up in 1991. It is high time for a new concept, and that should be top of the agenda at the NATO Washington summit next year.

I suggest that the concept might contain, first, the clear mission statement that I asked for; secondly, guidance to the military and defence planners; thirdly, reassurance to world audiences that NATO is still a vital part of the free world's security system and that it is flexible enough to react to anything, anywhere in the world. Finally, it must accommodate the European security and defence identity and the common foreign and security policy without undermining the North Atlantic alliance.

I shall refer briefly to Spain's membership of the integrated military structure, and to Gibraltar. Earlier this week, at the annual general meeting of the British Gibraltar parliamentary group, an event which does not usually generate much parliamentary excitement, concern was expressed about agreement at Madrid that Spain should join the IMS. We were assured by the Foreign Secretary at the time of that agreement that it would not mean a sell-out of Gibraltar. However, many of us felt that, as Spain was so keen to join, the British Government should take the view that, unless Spain stopped harassing the civil population of Gibraltar, it should not enter the IMS of NATO.

The Foreign Office has assured me that a deal has been done with Spain. I should like to know a little more about that. COMGIBMED, the NATO headquarters in Gibraltar, is to close, which will have an impact on the economy of Gibraltar, and there is much concern on the rock, as hon. Members who have visited recently have confirmed. If Spain is to enter the IMS, we must have firm assurances that harassment of military ships and aircraft and of movements connected with NATO exercises will stop. Harassment of the civil population must stop, too.

The Defence Committee has repeatedly said that NATO remains the cornerstone of our security and defence policy. I welcome Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, but I sound a note of caution about further enlargement.

1.40 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) was kind enough to mention my reports to the economic committee of the North Atlantic Assembly on the costs of NATO expansion. Those reports helped to clear obfuscation about the costs of expansion, to which NATO unnecessarily added by its secrecy about the costs.

On 2 December 1997, NATO's meeting of Defence Ministers adopted the conclusion of NATO's senior resources board's study that the costs of new infrastructure would be $1.5 billion over 10 years, as the Foreign Secretary said. That might be an underestimate, but the figure is certainly significantly lower than the Pentagon's estimate, and a fraction of estimates in reports from other bodies such as the congressional budget office.

Earlier reports made three assumptions. They believed that five countries would join, but there will in fact be three. They believed that there would be forward deployment of forces from current member states into the territory of new members, something that is not necessary. They believed that infrastructure for new member states would have to be compatible with that of existing members, a belief that is not supported by the threat environment or by facilities in the new member states. Those reports therefore came up with such high costs on a flawed basis.

The estimate of $1.5 billion is for common funding of NATO infrastructure. It covers only one category of costs that analysts have linked to enlargement. Other costs will fall to national Governments, not to NATO, and they include restructuring and modernising, particularly for states' own armed forces. The three new countries have agreed to increase defence spending by between 10 and 30 per cent.

Mr. Frank Cook: Has my hon. Friend taken account of the tendency of those in the United States who plump for the higher estimates to use the argument to support their consistent demand for more burden sharing and to justify a higher European contribution?

Mr. Cohen: That is a factor. Some would like European nations to put in much more money, but that is not justified, in my view.

The main emphasis should be on interoperability—which will not happen overnight—better communications between the new members' forces and their allies, training and joint training. The new countries should not be harassed to upgrade their weapons quickly. As long as there is a benign security environment, there is no case for that, or for the excessive cost estimates.

We must resist pressure from militarists and United States right wingers to insist on high defence spending across Europe and especially in the new countries. We must resist United States and other defence contractors who want to use hard sell and make up false threats to try to get those countries to buy weaponry.

Much has been said about Russia. Whatever happens with NATO, one of the most important issues will be how the treaty is seen by non-members, especially Russia. The effects of capitalism are much more likely to lead to trouble in and from Russia than any alliance configuration. Democracy, anti-corruption and economic stability should be the priorities. We have partnership agreements with Russia, which even has a full-time delegation at NATO headquarters. It could be said that Russia is at least a little on board with the new security arrangements whereas, during the cold war, it was not on board at all.

I am not in favour of any return to cold war blocs or cold war thinking. Territorial expansion after military victories invariably breeds resentment and the potential for future wars. The end of the cold war has that potential. It is essential that its end should be seen in terms not of victory and defeat but as an opportunity for a more inclusive new world order incorporating security arrangements for all, including Russia. It is essential to improve NATO's inclusive arrangements for Russia.

Such arrangements must include a conventional forces in Europe agreement, tightened by all NATO countries, as well as Russia, holding fewer arms. NATO countries should take the lead in having fewer conventional forces in Europe. The arrangements should lead to nuclear weapons reductions. They are still the greatest danger to the world, and we should take this opportunity to get significant reductions everywhere, not just in Europe. We should play a role in that.

There should be no duplication of militarism. I oppose the expansion of a military role based on the European Union. I do not think that the European Union should have a military wing in addition to what exists in NATO. That would be duplication.

NATO must change. That it changes is more important than expansion. The shadow Defence Secretary's comments about NATO being hard or soft were most unhelpful. The combined military force of NATO countries is massive. It could more than ably deal with any conventional threat. The weak link is political liaison and the potential for mistrust and misunderstanding. So, with the cold war over, there has to be far more of a political role for NATO. That is why I welcome the defence diplomacy aspects described my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in the strategic defence review last week. That has to be extended to NATO.

We must have observation, verification and joint exercises with the non-member countries such as Russia, in order to increase mutual trust. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe should have an expanded role as well.

The three new states are joining NATO because they want to. I believe that they have unduly high expectations of what they will get out of membership. Some may view it as a panacea, and I certainly do not think that it is that, but they want to join, and those views should be respected. However, that does not make any automatic case for their joining. Existing NATO members can also say no or not yet if they choose. I believe that they should say that in respect of any significant future expansion. Integration should be tilted towards the European Union instead in the first instance. That is where the emphasis should be over the next decade.

Defence is an insurance policy, but it can be costly. Money for social purposes such as schools and hospitals is lost as a result of defence spending, so it should be kept to the minimum deemed essential. Alliances and co-operation between states can lead to improved security for all and to less cost than defence which is born out of mistrust. I favour greater communication, co-operation and partnership between states. I favour far greater inclusivity rather than isolation, within which threats are imagined and exaggerated to dangerous proportions.

A security system is better than none at all. However, it should not be at exorbitant cost or be unnecessarily heavily armed. It must be an institution for peace, not a threat to world peace in itself. It must be inclusive, not exclusive. That is why NATO must change politically. NATO's peacekeeping role in Bosnia, including the non-NATO states, points to one of the ways forward to that change.

The way in which NATO is run also needs to change. It is a different animal now than it was in the cold war. The United States' tendency to insist on, or dominate, decision making, or to threaten not to engage if it does not get its way, should give way to a more open, equal, consensual decision-making process involving all the

[Mr. Cohen]

NATO members. NATO expansion is going ahead, but it is its political role, with an emphasis on inclusivity and co-operation, that needs to be expanded.

1.53 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Grand strategy and high diplomacy do not merit long speeches. I want to refer to the issue that is central to our whole debate. What does NATO exist for? It exists for the preservation of liberty and the safeguarding of democracy—values that are now shared across our continent, thank God. It is an alliance to which all ought to be able to aspire. It is an alliance which all ought to be eligible to join.

The Foreign Secretary, quite rightly, said that he wanted the process of enlargement to include Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland and not to produce any further divisions in our continent, of which we have seen enough in our lifetime. For me, the coming down of the Berlin wall was the most exciting event of my time in politics. The interment in a fitting manner of the Tsar, the Tsarina and their family in St. Petersburg today has a symbolic aspect that we should not forget: it is a beacon of hope for restitution and reconciliation within Russia, on which a new relationship within our continent can be built.

Vulnerability should not exclude a country from membership. Had it done so, would we have allowed Norway to be in NATO? During the cold war, there was only one Norwegian battalion in position in Finnmark, and in the whole of the northern part of Norway, there was only one Norwegian brigade. There were no NATO troops, nor any nuclear weapons stationed in Norway; there were exercises, it is true, but never were they stationed there. Norway, a country contiguous to the Soviet Union at a point of particular strategic vulnerability to the Soviet Union—northern Norway is adjacent to the Kola peninsula, which had the greatest concentration of offensive Soviet military power—was able to maintain a satisfactory relationship with its totalitarian neighbour and preserve its own integrity as a country as a full member of the north Atlantic alliance. That is a model which we should follow.

We should remember that never in its history has NATO acted in an offensive manner. That is in complete contradistinction to what the Hungarians suffered at the hands of their Warsaw pact allies in 1956 and the Czechoslovaks suffered in 1968. Similarly, the Poles have little to be thankful for, what with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Yalta agreement, the way in which the workers' uprising was put down in 1956 and the struggles of Solidarity against what ultimately became military rule.

All three countries—Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic—are now to be warmly embraced in our collective security apparatus in NATO, but we should not exclude others—for example, the Baltic states. How can they be a threat in any sense to their neighbours? They do not possess the armed forces to be a threat; they are democratic; and they have the rule of law. Estonia and Latvia are trying to come to a satisfactory accommodation with their Russian minorities, offering them citizenship and full participation in the democratic processes of their respective nations. I have had the privilege of leading parliamentary delegations to both those countries in the past three years.

People may point out that there is a border dispute between Estonia and Russia, but it is not of Estonia's desire. Estonia hoped that the Tartu treaty would be recognised by the new Russian Federation, but it has not been. Estonia has put forward new proposals to accommodate Russian concerns but, so far, those have lain on the desk of the Russian Government, unsigned. As for the Latvians, they are doing everything that they can to extend citizenship to the Russians living within their border.

If we are to say that a nation should be excluded because it is small and can make very little military contribution, how is it that Luxembourg, which has only one battalion, is a member of NATO? How is it that Iceland, which has no troops at all, is a member of NATO? We should not be too critical of NATO nations' internal affairs, because all countries go through difficult periods. We accepted Portugal under Salazar. We allowed Greece under the Greek colonels to remain in the alliance. We even allowed Turkey to remain in NATO after it invaded northern Cyprus.

We should bear it in mind that freedom is indivisible. We were prepared to launch the Berlin airlift 50 years ago to ensure that freedom was retained in the western part of the city. Had we not done so, Berlin could have fallen, which would have been a dire precedent. As a consequence of our action, the Brussels treaty was signed later that year and the Washington treaty the year after. It is because of the collective security arrangements that were put in place at that time that western Europe has enjoyed liberty. I do not see why central and eastern Europe should not also, under NATO, ultimately enjoy that liberty.

2 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): If any hon. Member had stood up in the House 10 years ago and said that NATO would enlarge its membership into central and eastern Europe in the next decade, he or she would have been regarded as unhinged.

We have heard much today about how the enlargement of NATO is an historic development—which it is—on a scale that is still hard to grasp. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) made an important point about today's events in St. Petersburg. There has been a remarkable transformation of the landscape in Europe, which is an historic development indeed.

It is also an historic vindication of those who bought the western alliance to its present position. There would have been no possibility of enlargement if Baroness Thatcher's Government in the 1980s had not, in the recent words of the Leader of the Opposition,

"rejected the simple-minded arguments for unilateral disarmament, and stood up for NATO and the western alliance in the years when that support counted the most".—[*Official Report*, 9 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 939.]

Mr. Frank Cook: The hon. Gentleman's quote referred to "unilateral disarmament". I believe that he and his right hon. Friend meant unilateral nuclear disarmament. There is a difference.

Mr. Trend: I happily confirm that that is what my right hon. Friend and I meant.

The road along which Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary have travelled towards NATO ran through Greenham Common, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) reminded us, that road ran within the perimeter fence of Greenham Common, not outside it.

It gives all Opposition Members enormous satisfaction to hear the Foreign Secretary concede, if not in so many words, that he is now one of That[illegible]r's children. He referred to

"We who owe so much to the alliance".

That transformation of his view is a matter for congratulation. Never mind about seeing the light on the road to you know where. He pronounced only 10 years ago:

"It is nonsense on stilts"

for Britain to

"pretend to be a nuclear power."

On 20 September 1985, on page 6 of *Tribune*, he put his name to the view that Britain should not be aligned to any major power, such as NATO. Thank heavens he is now one of us. We welcome the Foreign Secretary in his role as a full-hearted supporter of NATO and its nuclear deterrent. It can be said that, on this issue at least, the Foreign Secretary is sound.

Continuity in policy—*[Interruption.]* This is an important point. Continuity in policy towards the extension of the NATO alliance to the east is welcome. The Madrid summit, where Britain was represented two months after Labour's general election victory by the Prime Minister, brought to a successful conclusion the work begun at Brussels in 1994. The Opposition today whole-heartedly support the three former Warsaw pact nations seeking membership of NATO.

Two weeks ago, I was in Poland at a conference that included politicians from all three Visegrad countries. We were discussing their approach to the enlargement of the European Union. They were disappointed at how little progress had been made on that in the past six months, but they were immensely enthusiastic about their coming membership of NATO. In Poland, that is a cross-party matter. From their point of view—and from ours, as Opposition Members—the Madrid summit was more successful than the Amsterdam summit.

So much for the past—the old certainties that existed when NATO kept watch on the iron curtain have gone, or at least changed beyond recognition. A new question has arisen and will continue to be the central concern for the foreseeable future: what is NATO for?

We have heard many interesting views on the subject today and there has been general agreement on many, if not most, points. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) spoke with huge authority, based in part on his distinguished role in the NATO parliamentary assembly. Much the same is true of the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), who made an excellent point about current economic realities in Russia.

Our debate has been most lively in respect of the Russian question. While not agreeing with the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), he put the case against expansion with great passion. The view of almost all others who spoke, starting with my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), was that, while Russia's perception of its own interest is vital, we must not allow it to have a veto over the alliance.

It would also be right to include the important contribution to the debate by the Defence Select Committee, whose Chairman, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), made an important speech. The Select Committee sought to find answers to some difficult questions, including the particularly astute question put to it by Mr. Ronald D. Asmus, who said:

"If Russia is no longer the question to which NATO is the answer, what is the question? And how does enlargement help answer the question?"

The Committee's conclusions are important, and I should like to pick out one or two. The vital issue in terms of enlargement is not whether there will be an extension of NATO, but its pace and manner. That was the view reached by the predecessor Committee in 1994 and endorsed by today's Select Committee. It is the right view.

Particular concerns have been expressed about the effect of enlargement on NATO's military effectiveness, especially in the light of the need for new entrants to improve their military capabilities. The Select Committee rightly concluded that the benefits in terms of increased ability in central and eastern Europe should outweigh the short-term costs.

Others have questioned the effect of an increase in NATO's size on its flexibility and the speed of its decision-making processes. There is, however, no reason to believe that the new NATO partners will wish to step out of line with the existing 16 or that they will be anything other than model members.

In the context of relations with Russia, we welcome the signing of the Founding Act in May 1997, which provides mechanisms for co-operation between NATO and Russia, including the establishment of the permanent joint council. However, we urge the Government to take serious notice of the views of the United States Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and our own Select Committee that the Founding Act should not become a means by which Russia could gain a veto over alliance decisions.

We also welcome the formation of the Euro-Atlantic partnership council in May 1997, building on the existing "Partnership for Peace" initiative and offering central and eastern European countries enhanced co-operation with NATO. The operation of the NATO-led SFOR in Bosnia, drawing NATO and non-NATO countries together has helped to ease fears over NATO's expansion. Perhaps the Government will clarify their position on the boundaries of NATO operations for the future. Will NATO's capacity to act out of area be increased?

There are other important questions on which we should like to hear the Government's views today. Indeed, I should like to bring the focus of the debate back to the Government. Greater clarity is needed on the financial costs of enlargement, both to new entrants and to existing NATO members.

The Prime Minister told the House last year that there was

"no reason why Britain's financial contribution . . . should rise significantly in real terms."—[*Official Report*, 9 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 937.]

Is that still the Government's view?

[Mr. Trend]

Have the Government had any reason to revise their opinion since then? The Defence Select Committee's third report of 1997–98, on NATO enlargement, noted that the figure of $1.5 billion as the estimated cost of enlargement was a minimum figure, and said in paragraph 77 that the actual cost "may well be greater." The Committee concluded, in paragraph 86:

"we cannot share the Secretary of State's confidence that $1.5 billion represents the probable limit on the true costs of enlargement."

Will the Secretary of State clarify the position? Might the United Kingdom pay more than the current estimate of £11 million per annum for enlargement during the next decade?

Conservative Members were not bowled over by the recently announced strategic defence review. We shall watch very closely indeed how the Secretary of State manages with his greatly reduced budget. Britain must always be in a position to honour in full its NATO responsibilities. May we have a specific assurance on that point today?

Perhaps the Secretary of State will help us by setting out the Government's position on the future enlargement of NATO. I return to the subject of the Russians. The widely predicted Russian backlash against the existing extension of NATO never materialised. Should we now allow supposed Russian intransigence to be used as a reason to block further NATO expansion into, for example, Slovenia or Romania—about which my hon. Friends spoke well? In 1997, the Prime Minister said that those countries were

"strong candidates for any future enlargement".—[*Official Report*, 9 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 937.]

Perhaps the Secretary of State will expand on that view today. Is future enlargement a clear priority for NATO, and is it a clear priority for the UK Government?

It must be acknowledged that Russia will vigorously oppose the Baltic states' entry to NATO. What is the UK Government's reaction to that? It is a commonly held view that Russia should not have a veto on NATO expansion, yet Russia's attitude is central to the debate on the possible entry into NATO of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. If those countries are judged to have made the necessary progress in, for example, their treatment of the Russian-speaking populations, will the bar to NATO membership remain? Washington recently reassured the Baltic states of its continued support for their right to seek NATO membership. Is that also the position of the British Government?

The Secretary of State heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden that we believe that the greatest caution should be exercised in that area. This debate illustrates the importance of NATO as the basis for European defence and the main guarantor of European security. However, some would favour another solution to the question of European security, through the integration of the Western European Union into the European Union, as foreshadowed by the Amsterdam treaty. We believe that that move was driven by political considerations and a desire in some quarters to advance the cause of European federalism.

We welcome the fact that European countries are doing more to defend themselves, and we support initiatives such as the combined joint task forces, which enable the WEU to support NATO more fully. However, the WEU should not be used to undermine the Atlantic alliance, or to question the role of NATO and the vital United States contribution as the cornerstone of our defence. I hope that the Government share those sentiments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) and the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) made interesting points on the relationship between NATO, the WEU and the European Union. No doubt we shall debate the subject in greater detail in future.

Comparisons between NATO and EU enlargement are instructive. The two are complementary but not symmetrical. Of the two, NATO enlargement is proceeding more rapidly, despite the obvious obstacles in the way of extending a military rather than a political alliance. That shows what can be achieved when there is real political momentum behind the reforms.

NATO enlargement will achieve two aims. First, it will provide security guarantees for the individual states involved. Secondly, it will enhance the prospect of peace and stability for Europe as a whole.

However, in considering enlargement, we must recognise that, although prospects of NATO membership act as a spur to democratic and constitutional reform in central and eastern Europe, NATO, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford–on–Avon said at the start of the debate, is a military guarantee, not a political club. In that I must disagree with the hon. Members for Leicester, South and for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen). Expansion has to be manageable and credible. New entrants need to be able to contribute to the collective security that NATO membership entails. Military considerations should be at the heart of discussions about NATO expansion.

In the 1980s, the Conservative Government got right the question to which NATO was the answer. It is a matter of some regret that the Labour party did not. Now that the Labour party is in government, let us hope that it helps to frame the right questions for the future. The right answer will remain the Atlantic alliance.

2.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Let me begin with a simple, but, I hope, clear statement about the importance of the North Atlantic alliance to the Government and to this country. Unlike the Conservatives, I give Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic an unambiguous and warm welcome to the NATO family.

Since its foundation in 1949, when another Labour Government were in power, the transatlantic alliance has been the cornerstone of European security. It established a community of nations committed to promoting shared values and defending common interests, and it still forms a concrete link between the influence and interests of European democracies and those of the United States and Canada. By doing so, it enhances the political and military capability of every member of that community.

Every British Government and official Opposition since 1949 have been firmly committed to the alliance. The House should have no doubts about the Government's

continuing commitment. As the strategic defence review amply demonstrated, we are determined to ensure that strong British defence is maintained and that the alliance remains the key instrument in ensuring peace and security for our citizens.

The strategic defence review which we published last week reaffirmed that a strong and relevant NATO is central to the security of Europe and to Britain's defence and security policy. The outcome of the review, with its emphasis on the need for forces that are deployable, mobile, flexible and sustainable, means that we shall maintain a highly effective commitment to the full range of alliance missions, including peace support and collective defence. We shall continue to play a leading role in the vital work of transforming the alliance, including the admission of the three invited countries.

I will not have been alone in finding the speech of the Opposition's chief defence spokesman grudging, confused and mean-spirited, and a remarkable transformation from previous Conservative positions on the rights of newly freed nations to make their own decisions about their security. For more than half a century, we have yearned and worked for the day when the great countries of central Europe returned to democracy, pluralism and enterprise economies, and the unwanted chains of the Warsaw pact were cut from their armies.

It is sad that it took my intervention to prompt the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) to get round to saying outright that he was in favour of our old but temporarily enslaved allies rejoining us in a free alliance of nations. I assure him that the people of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary will notice with some concern the change in tone and content from the Conservatives.

Dr. Julian Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman is reading too much into what was said earlier. A little humility would be in order from the representative of a party three quarters of whose Members of Parliament wanted this country to give up its nuclear deterrent and wanted NATO to refuse the vital cruise and Pershing missiles that saw the end of the Soviet Union. The people of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia—as it then was—remember which party stood up to the Soviet Union and which party wanted to lie down in front of it.

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman, of all people, should not be castigating others for changing their minds. Let him be reminded that, from 1949, when a Labour Government took us into the North Atlantic alliance and a Labour Foreign Secretary was the architect of the treaty, the Labour party has never wavered for a moment in its support for NATO and continued membership of it.

I turn briefly to a political party that is not represented in the House today. No member of the Scottish National party has contributed to or been present for this important—indeed, historic—debate. That is hardly surprising, given that the SNP does not believe in NATO. Despite the fact that the alliance has helped to maintain peace and security in Europe for the past 50 years, and despite its magnificent efforts in Bosnia, the Scottish nationalists would turn their backs on NATO.

While other small nations in Europe are desperately trying to get into NATO, the SNP is scrambling to get out. What more obvious example could one give of the narrow nationalism and isolationism of that party? What more potent symbol does one need of the nationalist empty-chair policy in the councils of Europe? As part of the United Kingdom, Scotland is able not only to enjoy the security that comes from being part of NATO but to offer leadership to the world. The SNP wants to throw all that away and turn Scotland from a world leader to a spectator on the sidelines.

Mr. Blunt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robertson: No, I want to address some of the many points that have been made in the debate. I may be generous to the hon. Gentleman later, as he has sat through the entire debate.

Enlarging the alliance is, of course, no small step. As many hon Members have said, it requires careful thought. I therefore welcome all the thoughtful speeches in the debate, as well as the admirable report of the Select Committee on Defence, which was published in April. I also welcome the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) in amplification of that report. I welcomed the report when it came out, and I gladly and sincerely welcome it now. It was a considered analysis of the issues. I was heartened by its broad support for the policy that the Government have pursued on this important issue.

The Committee commented on the need for a parliamentary and public debate on NATO enlargement. Although some hon. Members have expressed dissatisfaction with the delay and interruption in the debate, I should point out that we are debating this important issue before the Government ratify the treaty—under the Ponsonby rules, we are not obliged to do so—and following the publication of the strategic defence review, which has helped.

The Defence Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South, produced another report yesterday, which dealt with a further letter that I had sent to it. The report asks that the confidential study on costs published by NATO and made available to the Committee in confidence be put in the public domain. We shall ensure that NATO is informed of the Committee's request. The matter is one for collective decision based on consensus among allies. The report is not the property of the Government, but we will certainly tell NATO of the Committee's views.

The broad political considerations that underpin the alliance's decision to add to its membership have been set out amply by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. As Defence Secretary, I shall stress the practical and military implications of enlargement of the alliance. I shall remind the House of the commitments involved. When we undertook to defend Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, they undertook to defend each other and all other NATO members. In the memorable words of the Washington treaty,

"an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an armed attack against them all".

Those historic and momentous words in 1949 are still as important and significant today. I have no doubt that the three invited countries will meet the obligations involved in such a commitment with honour, dedication and military professionalism.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall), who apologised for having to leave before the end of the debate, was wrong when he

[Mr. Robertson]

suggested that the contributions of Poland and the Czech Republic to SFOR in Bosnia represented the limit of their military capabilities. That is simply not true. The new members have substantial armed forces and have plans to modernise them and make them interoperable with NATO forces as a whole. The three new countries understand that they must develop such capable forces and must commit them to NATO.

It will take time to integrate the armed forces of the three countries into NATO. We seek a contribution to common defence, not rapid rearmament or crippling defence expenditure. For their own security, the three countries would have had to invest anyway for their own defence, and it is easier and more effective to do that collectively inside NATO.

We have heard much about the importance of Russia and of Russian views. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has changed his views a number of times on these issues, but we always listen to him with interest for a view that may be different from those that are expressed throughout the House. However, he was wrong to say that the two Front-Bench teams were united. If he reads the speech by the Opposition spokesman, he will see a clear difference between it and the warm welcome for NATO enlargement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

My hon. Friend read out the names of the distinguished signatories to the letter to *The Times* that objected to further NATO enlargement. I disagreed with it when I saw it, and I disagree with it now. My hon. Friend asked for a response to that letter. There was one from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the signatories, and I will ensure that a copy is placed in the Library so that my hon. Friend can see it.

My hon. Friend asked about assurances that might have been given to the Soviet Union about NATO enlargement. No British Minister has ever given any formal undertaking that NATO would not expand eastwards; nor should any have done so. The Government believe that it is a decision for the three countries and for NATO, and for nobody else. He asked about the impact of NATO enlargement on the START 2 process. We all hope that the Duma will soon ratify START 2. The Russian Government are confident that it will do that. I hope that, when Mr. Primakov reads the copy of the strategic defence review that I sent him yesterday, he will see what this country is doing about reducing strategic warheads. Perhaps the Duma will follow our example.

The opponents of NATO enlargement cite Russian resistance to it, but Russia has nothing to fear from that enlargement. The stability that it will bring to central Europe will be in Russia's best interests. We have said that to the Russians. Their opposition to the new NATO is misplaced, because NATO is not designed to threaten Russia, or its legitimate interests or those of any other country. NATO simply provides its members with a guarantee of collective defence.

Of course, we must consider the impact of these decisions on Russia and on other countries, and we should be open and honest about our intentions and those of the alliance as a whole. As many hon. Members have said, Russia cannot exercise a veto on the decision to join or to be admitted to NATO. NATO members made the intentions clear and gave specific assurances to Russia and to others.

I ask the Russians, whether the Government, the Opposition or the various parties in the Duma: can we really believe that Russia is less secure as a result of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland being governed by democratic and moderate Governments and able to participate fully in the system of collective defence that has done so much to defend peace in Europe? The answer to that question is self-evident.

I cannot say which country will be next invited to join the alliance or when, but we will not close the door on the legitimate aspirations of countries that wish to join the alliance, whatever their location in Europe. Our guiding principle will be the effectiveness—

Mr. Blunt: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Robertson: At 28 minutes past 3, even my generosity would be stretched to the limit. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for not giving way.

Our guiding principle is, and will continue to be, the military effectiveness of the alliance. It will be important to assess the process of absorbing the three new countries and the practical military implications of the current enlargement before making decisions on further invitees.

Much has been made of the cost of enlargement, but the new figures presented by NATO have been accepted by all major countries, including the Americans, as well as by the invitees. The figures form a solid, sensible basis for moving forward into enlargement.

I should like to close the debate with a statement which I think expresses the feelings of the House and this country. This decision is a landmark in our relationship with the three fellow European countries which have suffered so much from the turbulence of this century. Their commitment to NATO represents—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

NORTHERN IRELAND BILL (PROGRAMME)

Ordered,

That in the following provisions shall apply to proceedings in the Northern Ireland Bill.

Second Reading

1. Proceedings on Second Reading shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on Monday 20th July; and when the Bill has been read a second time it shall, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any question being put.

Committee stage

2. Proceedings in Committee shall be taken in the following order, namely, Clause 1, Schedule 1, Clauses 2 to 4, Schedules 2 and 3, Clauses 5 and 6, Schedule 4, Clauses 7 to 13, Clause 23, Clause 14, Schedule 5, clause 15 to 22, Clauses 24 to 32, Schedule 6, Clause 33, Schedule 7, Clauses 34 to 54, Schedule 8, Clauses 55 to 59, Schedule 9, Clauses 60 and 61, Schedule 10, Clauses 62 to 69, Schedule 11, Clauses 70 to 76, Schedule 12, Clauses 77 to 80, Schedule 13, Clause 81, Schedules 14 and 15, Clause 82 and new Clauses and new Schedules.

3. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be completed at the four sittings specified in the following table, and

peach part of the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the allotted period (calculated from the commencement of proceedings on the Bill on that day) or at the time specified in the following table—

Sitting	*Proceedings*	*Allotted period of time*
Wednesday 22nd July	Clauses 1 to 13 Schedules 1 to 4	three hours
Thursday 23rd July	Clause 23	three hours or Seven o'clock (whichever is the earlier)
	Clauses 14 to 22, Schedule 5	six hours
Friday 24th July	Clauses 24 to 53 Schedules 6 and 7	six hours
Monday 27th July	Clauses 54 to 82, remaining Schedules, new Clauses and new Schedules	six hours

Remaining stages

4. Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading shall be completed at the two sittings on Thursday 30th and Friday 31st July and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at half-past Two o'clock on Friday 31st July.

Conclusion of proceedings

5.(1) For the purpose of concluding any proceedings which are to be brought to a conclusion at a time appointed by this Order, the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions (but no others):—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any Amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown; and

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(2) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(3) Proceedings under sub-paragraph (1) shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to sittings of the House and may be decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(4) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under sub-paragraph (1) (c) on Amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, or under sub-paragraph (1) (d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single question in relation to those Amendments, Motions or provisions.

Miscellaneous

6. Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply to proceedings on the Bill.

7. No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which proceedings on the Bill are taken.

8. Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the bill at the sittings on any of the days specified in paragraph 3 above for any part of the allotted periods which falls after Ten o'clock or (where Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings) applies) after half-past Two o'clock.

9. (1) If a day specified in this Order is one to which a Motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration) would, apart from this Order, stand over to Seven o'clock—

(a) that Motion shall stand over until the conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which, under this Order, are to be brought to a conclusion at or before that time;

(b) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which under this Order are to be brought to a conclusion after that time shall be postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on the Motion; and

(c) paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings on the Bill for the period after Ten o'clock for which sub-paragraph (b) permits them to continue.

(2) If a day specified in this Order is one to which a Motion for the adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 24 stands over from an earlier day

(a) the bringing to a conclusion of any proceedings on the Bill which under this Order are to be brought to a conclusion on that day shall be postponed for a period equal to the duration of the proceedings on the Motion; and

(b) paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings on the Bill for the period after Ten o'clock for which sub-paragraph (a) permits them to continue.

Supplementary

10. (1) If a Motion is made by a Minister of the Crown to amend this Order and if an effect of the Motion would be to provide a greater amount of time for proceedings on the Bill, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith and may be decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(2) If a Motion is made by a Minister of the Crown to supplement the provisions of this Order in respect of further proceedings on the Bill, the Motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, at any hour and the proceedings, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion three-quarters of an hour after they have been commenced.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 20th July, the provisions of paragraph 1 of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Community documents) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Mr. Secretary Dewar relating to the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning) (No. 2) Order 1998 and the Question thereon shall be put forthwith.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

Airport Development

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce a debate on the subject of limiting the environmental impact of airport developments.

In the next week, the Government will publish a White Paper setting out their proposals for an integrated transport policy. The House and large sections of our community await with considerable interest the Government's statement. Most of the publicity heralding the White Paper has focused on how my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and his team will tackle the damage to our environment caused by the unfettered use of the car, and the largely unplanned expansion of the road transport system over the past century.

It is now well over 20 years since society began to take seriously the need to limit the environmental impact of the car, yet it is only in the last few years that there has been a growing realisation that the massive expansion in air traffic, and the associated development of airports, cannot be left to a combination of free market forces and the isolated planning inquiry decisions which have often permitted incremental environmental devastation.

My hope is that the White Paper will start in earnest the debate on how we can plan the future of air transport in this country in line with the Government's manifesto commitment:

"The guiding principles of our aviation strategy will be fair competition, safety and environmental standards."

Central to the debate will be the question of how we can limit the environmental impact of airport developments. There is a growing body of opinion which says that we need a new approach to the development of airports. Before the last general election, the Deputy Prime Minister argued that it was time to think afresh about airport policy.

Until now, airport growth has been almost totally reactive to air traffic demand, and extremely little account has been taken of the long-term environmental impact of any development. The corollary of that approach is that the aviation industry has generally dominated policy making over airport expansion, while the wishes of communities and environmentalists have largely gone unheeded. If the preservation and improvement of our environment is to be among the core guiding principles of our integrated transport strategy, we can no longer simply react to the demands of the BAA, or any other section of the industry.

Instead, we must be proactive and set environmental standards and limits in advance of any proposed airport development or expansion. In that way, we should establish set criteria against which any development proposals would be judged and clarify an environmental cap placed on any particular airfield.

If anyone doubts the need for a new and proactive approach, I would simply draw to their attention the historical development of Heathrow, located in my constituency. Heathrow is a classic case study of the reactive incremental expansion of an environmental nightmare.

The history of Heathrow has been drawn together in a fascinating book by Phillip Sherwood, a local historian. He describes the small, picturesque villages and hamlets that existed in the south of my constituency before the second world war, including Heathrow, Longford, Harmondsworth, Sipson and Harlington. The fields near what was then Heathrow village became the location for a small civil airfield, which was brought into military use during the war. It is now clear that, at the end of the war, the Government decided that the Heathrow airfield should expand into a major airport for London.

For the following 30 years, the creeping development of the airport obliterated Heathrow village and began to erode the quality of the environment of the remaining villages and beyond. In the late 1970s, a proposal was submitted for a fourth terminal at Heathrow; it was eventually agreed to after an inquiry. However, Iain Glidewell, the inspector at the inquiry, made a firm recommendation to the then Secretary of State:

"all possible steps should be taken to satisfy those living around Heathrow that this is the last major expansion at the airport."

Initially, that was accepted by the Government. The then Under-Secretary of State for Trade, now Lord Tebbit, assured the House that the Government would not permit a fifth terminal at Heathrow. I regret the fact that, within six years, that commitment had been discarded and the inspectors' conditions ignored. As hon. Members will know, applications to construct a fifth terminal were submitted; they have been the subject of a public inquiry that has now entered its fourth year of deliberations.

The environmental impact of Heathrow is best illustrated by the representations being made to the terminal 5 inquiry by local community organisations and environmentalists. I pay tribute to the local residents who have led their David and Goliath struggle. I pay tribute to all those in the various residents' associations who have campaigned against the airport industry to protect our local—and, indeed, Londonwide—environment.

Leaders such as Dennis Gould and Rita Pearce from Longford, Mr. and Mrs. Sobey, who have campaigned for the Harmondsworth and Sipson association, and our former local councillor Keith Dobson have all had to fight hard merely to put their arguments at successive inquiries. Moreover, HACAN—the Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise—has estimated that more than 1 million people are seriously affected by aircraft noise from Heathrow.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): Does my hon. Friend agree that a ban on night flights is needed? I am sure that his constituents, like mine, have to put up with flights as early as 4 am every morning, which keeps them awake and makes life intolerable.

Mr. McDonnell: That is a pertinent point. At the terminal 5 inquiry, HACAN has made it clear that the noise generated by the four-terminal Heathrow is causing widespread suffering. Thousands of families are persistently deprived of sleep, as my hon. Friend said, by the noise of jumbo jets flying over London; the noise starts at 4 am and continues throughout the day. Even on BAA's evidence, 50 per cent. more people will be affected by aircraft noise in 2016 if terminal 5 is given the go-ahead.

From my constituency, residents' associations, the community health council and local doctors have combined to research and expose the impact on the health

of local residents of air pollution from the airport and its associated road traffic. A key finding of surveys undertaken by the community health council and residents was the high level of respiratory illness among people living on the estates round the airport. One local doctor has reported an incidence of asthma among local children of twice the national average and a similarly high comparative incidence of asthma and respiratory disease among other patient age groups.

The residents' associations have also expressed strong concerns about the risk to public safety posed by the location of one of world's largest airports in an area of such high population density. We should never underestimate the risk to life and limb of an aircraft coming out of the sky over such a densely populated area. Hanging over the heads of all the residents is a sense of inevitability that, if terminal 5 is given the go-ahead, the increase in the number of passengers passing through Heathrow from 15 million a year to 19 million a year will result in the next development—a new application for a third runway.

A third runway could result in the demolition of up to 4,000 homes in my constituency, wiping off the face of the earth the remaining villages to the north of the airport and displacing a whole community. That prospect creates uncertainty, which blights a whole area and a whole community.

The experience of my community with Heathrow should never be repeated, there or anywhere else. It could be avoided by the process advocated by numerous community and environmental organisations: the setting of environmental limits for existing and new airports. Those limits are nothing more than a set of permanently fixed environmental criteria that must be adhered to at each airport or planned airport.

The limits would be enshrined in the area's local development plan, and would involve an extensive range of environmental impact assessments. They would protect the local environment from continual expansion of airports and relieve the uncertainties and blight that expansion pressures create in any community.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about Heathrow's impact on his constituency. He will also be aware of the possible sale of RAF Northolt to the private sector, or the increase in the number of commercial flights that has been touted by people from various sources. Does he agree that, if either scenario were to materialise, local communities in both his constituency and mine would suffer blight, and there would be considerable environmental consequences?

Mr. McDonnell: That is a valid point. The consequences would be devastating for the whole region. My constituents would be sandwiched between two major airports, with all the pollution that that involves, and my hon. Friend's constituency would suffer not only increased noise and pollution but road transport gridlock, which would affect the whole of north-west London.

Environmental limits would relieve pressure and give certainty, as well as demonstrating to the aviation industry exactly what the operational limits of a particular airport are and what standards would be expected in any planned new airport. Stability would be provided both for the communities and for the industry, and the need for lengthy planning inquiries would be obviated, or at least reduced.

Environmental limits could be established either by agreement between the local planning authority and the airport operator, or by the Government. Their effectiveness would depend on their virtual irreversibility once agreed or set. The range of impact assessments or criteria that would comprise the agreement for a particular airport would naturally reflect the local environment.

There could readily be local flexibility, but several core limits are obvious: the airport's geographical boundary and its proximity to residential properties; the appropriate noise contours; the types of aircraft to be operated and the maximum number of air traffic movements per annum; the runway configuration and approved tracks for aircraft; the times of operation; the need or otherwise for the use of reverse thrust, night running of engines, ground power units, and other high-noise sources; the location of public safety zones and built-up areas overflown by aircraft on landing and take-off; the development of infrastructure to support the airport; and the protection of the green belt.

In its evidence to the Transport Sub-Committee, the Aviation Environmental Federation provided a checklist of environmental concerns relating to the use of airports, including an exhaustive list of issues to be addressed, under the broad headings of noise and vibration; emissions and effluents; land take; and infrastructure.

Serplan, the south-east regional planning conference, recently published a consultation document on a sustainable development strategy for the south-east and recommended that local authorities identify environmental limits at existing airports and set capacities in relation to surface access, noise and associated developments.

The advantages of setting such limits are obvious. They would establish how much air and road traffic would be generated by an airport development; how many air movements would take place, and between what times; the noise levels permitted; and, combined with local development plans, the area beyond which the airport cannot expand.

For the aviation industry and local businesses, it would be clear what developments were applicable. It has been proposed that the monitoring and enforcement of environmental limits would be the responsibility of the local authority, which would have strict enforcement powers. However, with the advent of a strategic authority for London, that may well be one of the environmental powers that we could attribute to the mayor and the assembly.

The use of environmental assessments is not new, especially under European legislation. In the past year, the Government have been consulting on a European Union directive on the extension of impact assessments to the environmental effects of public and private projects. That directive provides for greater public access to the environmental information on major development projects, such as airport developments, which enhances accountability and democratic control and ensures that decision making is more open and transparent. That would be a first for the aviation industry. Environmental limits would give purpose and teeth to the assessment.

Clearly, the country has recently woken up to the need for a thorough debate on the future of airports and the aviation industry. Like other forms of transport, air transport has brought considerable benefits, but the massive growth in air traffic and the substantial growth of airports has also imposed significant environmental costs.

[Mr. McDonnell]

In my constituency, we know of the effect on each generation—each generation of asthma sufferers, of people with respiratory problems and of people who cannot sleep at night and whose pleasure in their own gardens is undermined because of noise pollution.

If we are to tackle the environmental implications of that growth in airports, we must go beyond the protection of local environments from overblown airport development. We will need to combine the environmental limiting of airports with measures to promote the "polluter pays" principle within the aviation industry. That is a principle to which the Government have adhered since their election—they are now developing not only green policies but even green Budgets.

That could mean reviewing the existing tax exemptions on aviation fuel, for example, and negotiating via the European Union an environmental levy on airline fuel purchases. As in the car industry, that would increase the incentives for airlines to put pressure on manufacturers to improve fuel efficiency. In addition, Britain could follow other European countries by basing charges to airlines on the noise and weight of an aircraft, and fining individual companies for off-track flying.

I look forward to all those issues being tackled in the integrated transport strategy, which is to be published next week. I hope that, despite the proximity of that publication, the Minister will be able to throw some light on the Government's thinking on the impact of airports on the environment. That issue affects not merely my constituency and those of other hon. Members represented here today, but the whole of London. We have endured that problem for decades. It requires urgent attention, and I believe that this Government will give it such attention.

2.47 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) on his success in obtaining this debate and raising a matter that is of considerable importance not merely to residents in his constituency but those living throughout London, as he rightly said in his conclusion.

I shall do my best to respond to the issues that he raised, but I hope that he will appreciate that my responsibilities are primarily in the planning field and that wider matters of aviation policy are more strictly the responsibility of my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London. I know that my hon. Friend has contacted her about these matters and will continue to do so.

Our aim, like that of successive Governments since aircraft noise became a cause for concern, is to strike a balance between the economic benefits that airports bring and the numerous other effects on the surrounding communities, some of which are far less beneficial. Noise is usually the paramount concern of local residents, but we are also concerned about aircraft emissions, as they can affect both local and global air quality, and the surface access implications of airport developments, which are always carefully scrutinised.

Every airport has to tackle a range of waste and energy management issues, as well as development pressures, which are often concentrated in the areas surrounding an airport. Those pressures must be managed both by the airports and through the planning system to ensure that environmental consequences are acceptable.

Not surprisingly, much current interest in the subject surrounds BAA's current application for a fifth terminal at Heathrow airport. The House will appreciate that I may not address that issue in any great detail. The applications were accompanied by an environmental assessment, and the environmental impact has been the subject of much written and oral evidence to the inquiry. All information will be fully considered by the inspector, who is responsible for the conduct of the inquiry and for the consideration of evidence.

The Secretary of State's quasi-judicial position in the planning process precludes me from discussing the merits of the case, except to say that my Department's position on the application remains one of neutrality. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington has appeared twice at the inquiry, and he will understand the constraints that I am under. Our factual evidence is already on the public record, and I do not propose to recite swathes of it here.

Ministers are, however, committed to speeding up the planning process, and the way in which proposals for major infrastructure projects of national importance are dealt with—a stance that we reiterated in a policy statement in January. We are examining various options, ranging from modifications to inquiry procedures to alternative processes such as special development orders, hybrid Bills and Transport and Works Act 1992 procedures. We intend to consult widely on proposals to improve planning appeal procedures generally, with a view to reaching quicker decisions and minimising uncertainty while safeguarding the ability of all interested parties to participate fully and effectively in the appeal process.

Mr. McDonnell: One matter that does not appear to have arisen during the consultation process is the power of compulsory purchase, which the BAA inherited from the nationalised industry. The BAA uses that power ruthlessly to pursue its objective of developing the airport beyond what the local community believes to be legitimate environmental parameters.

Mr. Raynsford: As I understand it, the proposals being considered at the inquiry concern land within the existing curtilage of Heathrow airport, so no compulsory purchase powers are required. As for the time scale for inquiries, the long-running inquiry into terminal 5 at Heathrow is very much the exception rather than the rule.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) mentioned Northolt. I reiterate what my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces said in a recent Adjournment debate, when he made it clear that early proposals on the future of RAF Northolt were highly unlikely. In any case, the concerns of the local community, which my hon. Friend rightly aired today, will be an important consideration, as will matters raised by the White Paper on integrated transport when my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister publishes it in the near future.

Noise is of great concern to my hon. Friends the Members for Hayes and Harlington and for Putney (Mr. Colman), whose constituents are much affected by the noise of aircraft flying over them. Planning policy guidance 24 on planning and noise advises local authorities in England on the use of planning powers to minimise the impact of noise, at aerodromes and elsewhere. It sets out criteria for permitting both noise-sensitive and noise-generating developments, and it advises on the use of conditions to minimise the impact of noise. I am well aware, from my mailbag and from the views expressed by my own constituents who are affected by aircraft noise, of wide concern about noise in the vicinity of aerodromes. We will review PPG 24 and will take action, if necessary, to ensure that its principles are followed by local authorities and developers.

Regional planning guidance will apply national policies for airports at the regional level, taking full account of the Government's objectives for sustainable development, integration with surface transport and regeneration.

Mr. Colman: My hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the Heathrow express, which has just opened as extra access to the airport, access to which by public transport is difficult. Does he support the Sweltrac—South and West London Transport Conference—concept of a dedicated line from Waterloo through Putney and Wimbledon to allow direct access to the airport from the south-west?

Mr. Raynsford: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend about the merits of the Heathrow express, but I cannot be drawn into commenting on a matter that is not strictly my responsibility. I am sure that he has been assiduous in pressing the case for the Sweltrac proposal on my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London.

The Government recognise that it is essential that the potential impacts of development options, including airport development, are rigorously appraised as an integral part of the RPG preparation process. To that end, we have proposed that RPG should be subject to a sustainability and environmental appraisal from the outset. We have let a research project which will produce good practice guidance on the application of this technique, which is in its infancy, to RPG.

The Government are directly responsible for certain noise control requirements at Gatwick and Stansted, as well as at Heathrow, under section 78 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982. Under this power, we set night restrictions, noise limits and routes for departing aircraft, and regulations relating to arriving aircraft. Noise insulation has been provided.

The Government are engaged in a two-stage consultation on night flying restrictions, which were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney, at the three airports. A preliminary consultation paper was issued at the end of February which sought views on all aspects of the current arrangements. All responses to it will be considered before specific detailed proposals for night flying arrangements are drawn up. These will be consulted on in the second stage paper, which we intend to issue at the end of September. Hon. Members will appreciate that I cannot comment in detail on this matter while the consultation process continues.

Proposals to reduce the departure noise limits, by 3 dB(A) for daytime and 2 dB(A) at night, were made by the previous Administration. Following representations by the International Air Transport Association, the Department has undertaken to issue a supplementary consultation paper on these proposals. When this paper is issued, eight weeks will be allowed for consultation.

Noise preferential routes for departing aircraft are of long standing and have been designed to minimise—subject always to the need of safety—overflight of the more densely populated areas. In a city such as London, it is impossible to avoid overflight completely; even in the vicinity of Gatwick and Stansted, it is inevitable that substantial numbers are directly overflown. Efforts are being made to improve compliance with the routes.

The Department, through its aircraft noise monitoring advisory committee, is also examining noise from arriving aircraft and the feasibility of operational limits, and the scope for improvements in operational practice by airlines and air traffic controllers. That issue has assumed increasing importance, not least as the noise climate attributable to departing aircraft has improved over the years at Heathrow, Gatwick and some other airports.

Ground noise is subject to separate arrangements, managed by the airports. It comprises a range of activities, including taxing, ground engine running and movement of airport vehicles, which can cause significant nuisance to people living in close proximity to the airport, including constituents in Hayes and Harlington. The Department's technical advisers, the department of operational research and analysis at National Air Traffic Services, have recently undertaken a study of ground noise at night at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, and intend to publish the results soon. BAA, partly in the light of this work, has taken steps to improve practice—for instance, by the increased use of fixed electrical ground power supplies instead of noisy auxiliary power units.

Returning for a moment to Heathrow, we have given a commitment to do everything practicable to ensure that the noise climate there continues to improve, even though, after the phase-out of chapter 2 aircraft, this will be more challenging to achieve than hitherto. Because of uncertainty about the future aircraft fleet mix at Heathrow and retirement dates for Concorde, we cannot be sure of achieving such improvements year on year, every year. However, we have offered a further assurance to local people around Heathrow that the Government will take all practicable steps to prevent any deterioration in the noise climate after the chapter 2 phase-out is complete.

The regulations made in the UK implementing agreements made through the International Civil Aviation Organisation for the limitation of noise and emissions from aircraft also bear closely on the environment around airports, both large and small. The Government participate actively in the international forums responsible for developing environmental standards for new aircraft, and we are pleased that the older, noisier chapter 2 jet aircraft will be withdrawn from service by March 2002. We are pressing for a new standard, quieter than the preset ICAO chapter 3 requirements, to lock in advances in technology, and work on that will start shortly.

[Mr. Raynsford]

The only other issue that I wish to discuss is that of environmental limits, the case for which was eloquently espoused by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington. He made some interesting suggestions, not least on the role of the mayor and assembly. We will consider those points. I hope that I have assûred him that the Government are actively considering the issue of noise and the environmental impact of airports and doing our best to improve matters.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 20 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Armed Forces and Civil Society

1. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What plans his Department has to maintain and strengthen links between the armed forces and civil society. [49574]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): The armed forces already maintain strong links with the civilian community in a number and variety of ways, including the Territorial Army and the other reserve forces. We wish, of course, to encourage and build on these links.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Is he aware of the widespread concern, in all parts of the House and outside it, that the activities of the three cadet forces, and of the scouts, the guides and other community groups that use Territorial Army facilities, may be affected by plans to close and sell up to 170 TA centres? I trust that the hon. Gentleman is aware of and has anticipated that concern. Will he please tell the House today exactly what help will be available to ensure that those groups can continue their work as effectively as they have undertaken it in the past?

Dr. Reid: Yes. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the concern and support—which he expressed—on both sides of the House for the cadets is shared by the Government. That is one reason why we shall give detailed scrutiny to any changes in the Territorial Army and its premises. We wish to ensure that the subject of cadets and their access to appropriate facilities is included with the other considerations that have been agreed between the Territorial Army volunteer reserve associations and the Regular Army. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that is not only one of our wide considerations but one of our primary considerations. That is precisely why we have made it plain that, although there is to be a reduction in Territorial Army numbers, we do not desire a reduction in cadet numbers. Indeed, we are increasing the resources to cadets.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): As a former Army cadet, I congratulate the Government on strengthening the role of cadets in the strategic defence review. May I have a commitment from my hon. Friend that, when the Government examine the future pattern of TA centres throughout the country, they will ensure that the need for the TA to back up the cadets is fully taken into account?

Dr. Reid: Yes. I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are well aware of the valuable contribution that the cadet movement makes, not only to individuals but to society. Many young men and women are given opportunities that they could find in no other field of youth activity. I have personally witnessed young men and women in the cadets develop their character, ethos, discipline and initiative, and increasing opportunities are extended to them. It was for that reason that, during the strategic defence review, the Government decided that we would put more money into the cadets than previously.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman just said. However, to put this matter into perspective and to show its relationship with the decisions concerning the TA and the armed forces, can the hon. Gentleman say that the intention to provide new equipment and better standards and to give the TA more relevance will bring forth new money, which will bring about a real increase in resources for the TA? Or is the money to be found out of the savings resulting from the abolition of those units that will be scrapped?

Dr. Reid: The right hon. Gentleman would not expect me to say that while we are reducing the numbers of the infantry, yeomanry and other regiments in the Territorial Army, we are increasing the global sum. I can assure him, first, that our intention at this stage, subject to detailed scrutiny—the final decision on units will not come out until the autumn—is that at least a proportionate amount will be spent on the TA. Secondly, the TA will have access to a number of specialisms in the Regular Army for which training was not previously available to the TA—for example, Challenger, the AS 90 and several other areas. The Territorial Army will not only remain a valuable element of our defence forces, but will be more relevant and usable in future than it has been over the past 50 years.

Persian Gulf

2. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): If he will make a statement on the current security situation in the Persian gulf. [49575]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): The recent revelation that Iraq had, contrary to earlier claims, weaponised the VX nerve agent shows that it has continued to lie about its weapons of mass destruction. We will keep the pressure on Iraq to comply fully with all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Mr. Savidge: Following the revelation about the deadly VX nerve agent, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that we will maintain all pressure on Saddam Hussein to comply with relevant UN resolutions?

Mr. Robertson: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. Words cannot adequately describe the deadliness of the VX nerve agent. One single droplet of VX is capable of killing an individual. The aerosol version of VX can kill countless thousands of people. The fact that it is now proven that Saddam Hussein had weaponised the VX agent is a salutary warning not just of his deceit, but of the threat that he represents to his neighbours and to stability in one of the most volatile parts of the world.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Government have been steadfast in their relations with Iraq, and I congratulate them on that. Has the strategic defence review announced last week made more difficult any response that we might wish to make—God forbid—against any further action by Iraq? In particular, has the reduction in fighters and ships made our response less likely, if one were needed?

Mr. Robertson: No; on the contrary. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his praise of the Government's robust stance in relation to Iraq's challenge to the authority of the United Nations. He speaks well on that account, and the House is united in its determination to make sure that Saddam complies with the UN Security Council resolutions.

The purpose of the strategic defence review and one of the key reasons why it has had the support of the Chief of the Defence Staff and the single service chiefs is that, as a consequence of the review, we will be much better able to deploy our troops quickly and safely to the trouble spots of the world and to sustain them when they are there. Therefore, tyrants such as Saddam Hussein should pay careful attention to the new capability that will be represented by our forces after the strategic defence review.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Do we yet know who sold the VX agent to Iraq, or who sold Iraq the facilities to make it? Will the Secretary of State have a word with the German chemical companies Hoechst and Bayer, who might have known a great deal better?

Mr. Robertson: A lot of people bear responsibility for providing at an earlier stage some of the facilities that Saddam Hussein has used to create his capabilities. However, many of the nerve agents and chemical weapons were produced by him. I am concerned, not about raking over the past, but about making sure that in future Saddam Hussein is not able to produce such weapons of mass destruction, and that he keeps to the assurances that he has given that he has destroyed all those capabilities. He has not yet persuaded ambassador Richard Butler, the chairman of UNSCOM, that he has disposed of all those capabilities. Until he has given evidence of that, the sanctions regime stays in place.

Weapons Project

4. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley** (South-West Surrey): If he will list each major new weapons project begun since May 1997. [49577]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): Since May 1997, we have taken a range of important procurement decisions to ensure that the armed forces will have the equipment that they need. These decisions include the approval of major new projects for the replacement rocket for the guided multiple launch rocket system, the Hawk life extension programme, the successor identification friend or foe system and a new tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling.

Mrs. Bottomley: Arising out of the overall defence spending reductions in the strategic defence review, will the hon. Gentleman tell the House exactly what is the nature of the cuts that are planned in defence equipment spending over the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Spellar: The actual nature of spending on equipment is identified in the review. It covers a range of equipment areas, some of which have been maintained, some of which have been increased and some of which, as the hon. Lady knows, have been reduced. That is the pattern of the equipment programme as we look to reshaping the armed forces and their equipment for the new roles that have been identified for Britain in the world.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In looking at new important projects, especially that for the two new aircraft carriers, does the Minister agree that security from attack, in this case from the Treasury, would be greatly enhanced if we had a firm starting date?

Mr. Spellar: The strategic defence review gives a very clear, firm base for the future equipment programme. That fact is recognised, not only widely in the House but by the armed forces and, equally importantly, by industry, which has confirmed that point very strongly. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have also announced an in-service date for the new carriers, which has been welcomed by the Royal Navy.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Ministers have told us that they want more armed personnel in the services and more equipment—some small and some big. How will they pay for that? The strategic defence review gives the figure of £685 million in the first year, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer told us last week, in table A3 of his comprehensive spending review, that the real cumulative cut in the defence budget over the lifetime of this Parliament is £4.6 billion. Can the Minister confirm whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer has given an unequivocal commitment to the construction of the two aircraft carriers?

Mr. Spellar: We are looking at 3 per cent. in three years. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the report, he will see that we are actually talking about an accelerated programme of estates disposal arising out of the freeing-up of resources. In the longer-term equipment programme, we are talking about the impact of smart procurement, which we have negotiated in consultation and in partnership with industry—something which the previous Government singularly failed to do. As a result, we shall use best practice in industry to ensure that we achieve better value for money for the taxpayer.

Fleet Submarines

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Pursuant to the strategic defence review, if he will make a statement on the strategic and tactical roles of fleet submarines. [49579]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Royal Navy submarines will continue to play a vital role both strategically, in support of the deterrent, and tactically as part of any deployed maritime force. The introduction of the Tomahawk land attack missile later this year will provide a powerful additional capability.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Following the decision in the strategic defence review to cut the number of attack submarines from 12 to 10, can the Secretary of State give the House a guarantee that there will be no further cuts in the number of submarines? Will he also take this opportunity to confirm that the Government will commission all five new Astute class submarines?

Mr. Robertson: The purpose of the strategic defence review was to create a period of stability and to give some degree of direction to our armed forces. If the hon. Gentleman reads the review carefully, he will see that we intend to do precisely that.

The decommissioning of attack nuclear submarines will inevitably occur over a fairly lengthy period. Therefore, the step-by-step reduction in the fleet from 12 to 10 is deliberate in order to establish a level of 10 that will remain for a considerable time. The order for three Astute class submarines will be maintained, with plans to order a further two early next century. I believe that that amply demonstrates the Government's commitment to this valuable capability.

Mr. John Hutton (Barrow and Furness): May I warmly welcome the Government's decision to order an additional two Astute class strategic submarines nuclear? I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware that this will be welcome news in my constituency, where the first three of those new submarines will be built. Those are very modern, capable and effective ships, which I am sure will add considerably to the operational capability of our SSN fleet. However, can my right hon. Friend be more specific about when he expects the contracts for these further two additional Astute submarines to be placed?

Mr. Robertson: The shipyard in my hon. Friend's constituency has a proud record in this regard. I am glad that the orders for the three Astute class submarines that have been underlined by the strategic defence review will be carried forward in the spirit of the smart procurement initiative, which we have designed for our future equipment.

The previous Government's plans for a further two Astute class submarines will still remain. They are, of course, for the beginning of the next century. We are reducing the number of SSNs—attack nuclear submarines—but with the introduction of the three Astute class submarines we shall be increasing the capability of the fleet quite dramatically.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Secretary of State agree the reduction in the number of submarines in the fleet places a premium on the effective utilisation of the existing fleet, and in particular requires careful programming of refit schedules? Will the right hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to confirm the strategic importance of both Rosyth and Devonport as centres of excellence, both now and in the future, for the refitting of submarines? Will he also take the opportunity, given the fact that the Scottish National party's views on submarines have been splashed all over the Scottish newspapers both today and yesterday, to give his estimate of how many submarines will be available to Rosyth in the event that the SNP achieves its will and creates an independent Scottish navy?

Mr. Robertson: I confirm what the hon. and learned Gentleman said at the beginning of his supplementary question about the importance of the two dockyards at Devonport and Rosyth in dealing with the refitting of our nuclear submarine fleet at the present moment. The decommissioning of HMS Spartan in 2006 will dovetail with the entry into service of the first of the Astute class submarines. HMS Spartan's refit formed a major element of the dockyard refit programme announced by my predecessor, Mr. Michael Portillo. Its cancellation would have incurred substantial compensation payments, for which the Ministry of Defence would have received no benefit. We carefully programme our refits to make sure that we maintain military capability at the maximum possible level.

As for the synthetic indignation of the Scottish National party, SNP Members did not bother to turn up for the NATO enlargement debate on Friday, confirming their image as the neutralist nationalists. To argue for more nuclear submarine refits at Rosyth is to characterise the SNP's internal self-divisions, its internal hypocrisy and its policy of separation. Ripping Scotland out of the United Kingdom would lead to the loss of thousands upon thousands of defence jobs.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Putting the Scottish National party to one side, perhaps to where it belongs, may I say to my right hon. Friend that nuclear submarines are a familiar sight in the Firth of Clyde? May I also say to him that the code of practice on the passage of these submarines in and out of the Firth of Clyde is reasonably satisfactory? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that his Department has no plans to berth these vessels in Holy Loch? Will he tell me how far the cleaning programme has proceeded in that loch and whether the Pentagon will pick up some of the bill?

Mr. Robertson: I am glad to join my hon. Friend in setting aside the SNP, which I am sure the Scottish people will do as well. I was on Holy Loch on Saturday and, should anyone get the wrong impression, I was on a car ferry at the time. I am well aware of the issue of the cleaning of the loch and I can confirm that there is no intention by the Government of basing any of our submarines there, rather than at Faslane. The clean-up of Holy Loch is essential, and the majority of local opinion was in favour of it, but that is a responsibility of the Government, not of any foreign Government.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): Can the Secretary of State say why he has decided to cancel the planned refit of HMS Splendid and go ahead with the

planned refit of HMS Spartan? Could it have anything to do with the fact that HMS Spartan is to be refitted at Rosyth in Scotland and HMS Splendid was to have been refitted at Devonport in England?

Mr. Robertson: No, it had nothing to do with that. The trend away from large-scale open-ocean warfare means that we believe that we can reduce the SSN fleet over the next few years from 12 to 10. It therefore made sense to decommission HMS Spartan in 2006, following a refit, to allow that to dovetail with the entry into service of the first Astute class submarine. In doing that, I shall have maintained the capability of the fleet, with the Astute class submarines coming into service; avoided the waste that would have been represented by the compensation that would have been due to fall to Rosyth dockyard had we cancelled that refit; and been allowed to keep to a commitment made by Mr. Michael Portillo at the Scottish Grand Committee in Cupar, Fife, to put the refit of HMS Spartan into Rosyth as its last nuclear refit.

Mr. Maples: But Mr. Michael Portillo was not going to decommission HMS Spartan in 2006. The Secretary of State says that the decision makes sense, but the purpose of these refits is to give the submarines an additional 10 years of life. We are surely spending £150 million to give that submarine an additional four years of life at the most, because he has already announced its decommissioning in 2005-06. Is not the real reason for the decision the Government's problems in Scotland? The taxpayer is being asked to foot the bill for £150 million of election expenditure by the Labour party in Scotland and to protect jobs in the Chancellor's constituency.

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman's great mistake is judging all other political parties by the low standards of the Conservative party and, especially, of the previous Government. There were perfectly good financial, economic and military grounds, as well as social and industrial grounds, for going ahead with the refit of HMS Spartan. We have kept to the commitments made by the previous Government and will maintain in service until 2006, when the first Astute class submarine comes into service, the capability that is offered by the SSN class submarine.

Falkland War Veterans

6. **Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe** (Bradford, South): What steps his Department is taking to help Falkland war veterans. [49580]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 8 July, as part of the strategic defence review, our plans to set up a veterans' advice unit within the Ministry of Defence which will help to address the needs of all veterans, including those who served in the Falklands campaign. When the veterans' unit becomes operational later this year, it will help to make it much easier for all veterans to receive the best help available.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, which will be of assistance to all veterans. Falklands veterans in particular are aggrieved on two issues, which were dismantled by the previous Government—stress management and the opportunity to revisit the Falkland islands. He will be aware of my constituent, David Brown, who still suffers from the traumas of the Falkland islands. Will my hon. Friend ask the unit to consider those two issues?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that we are to establish a veterans' unit, which is not only part of showing the commitment that we feel to men and woman who have served their country, but a long-standing demand of the British Legion and other interested parties. I commend them for the role that they have played.

On Falklands veterans, my hon. Friend would like to know that, as far as possible and within our power, we assist those who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He has previously raised the case of one constituent and knows that we take this matter seriously, but he will understand that it is not possible to promise that we will give all service men free flights back to the areas in which they served. There would be financial difficulties with that, and difficulties with Treasury guidelines, and the system might be open to abuse. I regret that, in the case that he raises—I believe that he raised it in March 1997—we could not provide a free flight back to the Falklands for his constituent, but we shall certainly look at the request for general assistance for Falklands veterans.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Although a veterans' unit within the Department is to be welcomed, would not Falklands veterans who are still serving, and those who did not serve in the Falklands war but have learnt its lessons, say that sufficient helicopters are crucial for amphibious operations? Would not they be concerned by her Majesty's Government's decision not to implement the proposed purchase of a second tranche of Merlin anti-submarine warfare helicopters? Will the Merlin still be a contender for the replacement of the HC4 Commando Sea King helicopters of the Royal Marines—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. That question does not relate at all to the original question. Perhaps the Minister will reply to a little of it, but certainly not to the parts that are not relevant.

Dr. Reid: How could I defy your instructions, Madam Speaker, when they were so charmingly put?

All those who supported our forces during the Falklands campaign, would be heartened by the emphasis that this Government have placed, arising out of our strategic defence review, on coastal operations and amphibious capability, which were so important during the Falklands campaign. They would be particularly heartened by our confirmation of the importance of a full brigade-sized unit of the Royal Marines proceeding with the helicopter landing platform, as well as an increase in the number of armed forces personnel. They will be heartened by the fact that the Government support strong defence in practice, just as they did in 1982.

Trident

7. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What is his current estimate of the cost of the Trident nuclear fleet. [49582]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): The total acquisition cost for Trident is currently estimated to be £12.52 billion, 90 per cent. of which was already committed before this Government took office.

Mr. Corbyn: Does the Secretary of State regret that the strategic defence review did not include a discussion about the future relevance of a nuclear force? Does he recognise that the massive cost of running and decommissioning Trident could be better spent on other things, and that we would stand in better stead in opposing the development of nuclear weapons around the world if we got rid of our own nuclear weapons?

Mr. Robertson: I cannot regret not doing something in the strategic defence review when my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and I were elected on a platform of keeping the Trident system. My hon. Friend and I were both returned to the House on exactly those grounds. I direct my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) to the section of the strategic defence review on the deterrent and to the supporting papers in which we have published unprecedentedly open and new information about the nature of our deterrent. I also direct his attention to the substantial reductions that will now take place in our nuclear capability as a result of the defence review. We shall have half as many available weapons, with 30 per cent. of the explosive power that we had at the end of the cold war. That maintains the deterrent at a credible minimum level, but makes a sizeable contribution towards disarmament, of which we are all in favour.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the reduction in the number of nuclear warheads on the Trident submarine fleet. As a mere woman, I still cannot see what earthly use we have for 200 nuclear warheads, let alone 300, but the reduction is welcomed anyway.

What exactly is the current position of the talks on nuclear disarmament? Is there any hope of the Government pushing them on and getting them restarted?

Mr. Robertson: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady speaks on behalf of the Liberal Democrat party, but we welcome diverse views on all these issues. We want to move towards the reductions for which there is general welcome throughout the House. I hope that people will make more of that than of the opposite point of view. I remind the hon. Lady that when the Government came to power, they immediately ratified the comprehensive test ban treaty, and that this country was among the first of the nuclear powers to do so. As part of the strategic defence review, we are making a contribution to the fissile material cut-off treaty, which is a substantial move forward. The changes that we have made in the configuration of our nuclear deterrent in the new strategic circumstances will, I hope, act as an example to other countries in the world—especially to the Russian Parliament, which has so far failed to ratify the START 2 treaty. If we had ratification of that treaty, we could make sizeable steps in the overall reduction of strategic warheads that we all want.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid–Norfolk): We intrude at our peril in the private internal disagreements among Labour and Liberal Democrat Members over our nuclear deterrent. The Conservative party has always believed in a robust nuclear deterrent, and has been prepared, over many years, to put money into that. The costs of Trident are bound up in the comprehensive spending review. I should like the Secretary of State to return to the question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key). The cut in the overall defence budget of £685 million will, according to the Government's paper on the comprehensive spending review, in fact be £1.3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament. Can the Secretary of State explain that, or is there once again a Scottish connection?

Mr. Robertson: It is difficult to comprehend why the Opposition cannot understand that there will be a real-terms reduction in our defence budget of 3 per cent. in the next three years, which is an average of 1 per cent. a year. The Conservative party was responsible for cuts in the defence budget of 23 per cent. in real terms over the past seven years. In cash terms, the defence budget will go up by £1.4 billion in the period covered by the comprehensive spending review. I understand why the Opposition are sensitive about this issue, especially as the Conservative party spokesman seems to be suggesting that we should spend more money on defence, whereas the shadow Chancellor regularly pops up at the Dispatch Box and argues that public expenditure should be reduced. Is the Conservative party in favour of massive increases in the defence budget?

UK Reserve Forces

8. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on the role of the UK reserve forces. [49583]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): Members of the reserve forces contribute a great deal to this country in many ways, but their principal role is to reinforce the armed forces on operations. They do that as individuals and as formed units, and they will continue to play a key role in the future.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will he pay tribute to soldiers of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment in my constituency, who are currently on duty in South Armagh, together with the 1st Battalion of the RGBW? Will he confirm that, under the strategic defence review and the 17,000 reduction in the Territorial Army, there will be no abolition of cap badges? If that is to be his pledge, will he confirm that he will not achieve it by reducing battalions such as the 2nd RGBW to a company strength?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's local TA regiment and to all members of the Territorial Army for the valuable service which they have given us in the past and which individuals are giving us at present

in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and elsewhere. Part of the principles agreed between the Territorial Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association and the Regular Army is that the footprint throughout the country will have recourse, so far as is possible within the overall numbers, to a geographical spread of the TA and to the ethos and traditions of the individual units of the TA, which includes cap badges.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Does the Minister agree that modernisation of the reserves is long overdue, and that one of the main reasons why it has not been undertaken before now is that the last Government—now the Opposition—made decisions on political rather than military grounds? Does the Minister also agree that an Opposition whose main contribution to today's exchanges has concerned cap badges display an appalling lack of knowledge and thoughtfulness?

Dr. Reid: I certainly agree that the armed forces were let down by, among other things, the fact that financial—and often political—considerations were the starting point from which earlier Governments embarked on their so-called defence reviews. As most people know, those reviews were written on the back of an envelope, including a figure upfront that Ministers wanted to achieve.

Yes, we believe in the Territorial Army, to such an extent that we want to make it more relevant and usable in the future. Although I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend's remarks about cap badges—I think that the ethos and tradition of the Territorial Army matter—the truth is that the world has changed, and that, if it is to prove as valuable to us in future as it has in the past, the Territorial Army must change with it.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The largest regiment in the Army, which comprises mainly part-time volunteers, was not mentioned in a recent strategic defence review. When can we hear a statement on the future role and strength of the Royal Irish Regiment?

Dr. Reid: Consideration of the Royal Irish Regiment was not omitted. Indeed, it is one of the few regiments that I visited personally, in order to have discussions with both full-timers and part-timers in Northern Ireland. During my visit, I had fruitful discussions with both officers and men.

Detailed announcements about all the reserve forces and the Territorial Army will be made in the autumn. However virtuous the case of any particular unit may be, I do not think that it would be fair or reasonable to start picking off individual units, or making decisions about them, before the review reaches its conclusions.

Diversification

9. **Mr. Jonathan Shaw** (Chatham and Aylesford): If he will make a statement on his Department's plans for defence diversification. [49584]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): We received some 80 responses to our consultative Green Paper on defence diversification. We plan to publish our response, and announce our decisions on the way ahead, in a White Paper in the autumn.

Mr. Shaw: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. Does he agree that we have a history of failing to capitalise fully on the fruits and benefits of defence research? If we are to realise such opportunities in the market across the world, should we not get defence diversification up and running as soon as possible? Jobs rely on it. I am particularly concerned about my constituents who work at GEC in Rochester. Can my hon. Friend give us some idea of when the agency will be set up?

Mr. Spellar: We expect the agency to be set up not too long after the publication of the White Paper in the autumn. We are working very hard on the mechanics of it.

My hon. Friend is right. Too much defence diversification has resulted in the creation of jobs abroad, rather than in this country. We need to speed up the dissemination of techniques and technologies into civil industry, and also to encourage feedback from civil industry into the defence community. We believe that the defence diversification agency will play a significant part in achieving that.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister agree that premises are a major issue in defence diversification? Earlier answers given by his colleagues today have referred to an accelerated programme of defence disposals, and to the importance that he and other Ministers ascribe to social factors. Does he recognise that there is enormous concern in my constituency about his ministerial colleagues' continuing and repeated failure to answer questions about the future of staff college Camberley?

Over the past year, the Minister's colleague, the Minister for the Armed Forces, has repeatedly said, "Decisions will come shortly; decisions will come shortly." In a written answer that I received as recently as last Thursday, I was told that no decisions had been made, and that no proposals had even been put to Ministers. Proposals have been put to Ministers, not least by me. Jobs are at stake, and that prestige site must not be wasted or sold off for housing.

Mr. Spellar: As someone who raised that issue a number of times with the previous Government when we were in opposition, I can only say that the phrase "brass neck" comes to mind. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the allocation of the staff colleges is a complicated issue. We inherited a major problem and, as the hon. Gentleman also knows, under the previous Administration, some decisions were changed within six weeks or so. That is why my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces is working hard to try to get a satisfactory solution. Representations from the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members with people from the staff colleges in their constituencies will be welcome.

Army Manpower

12. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What proposals the Government have for reducing overstretch in the Army. [49587]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): We are firmly committed to reducing overstretch in the Army. The strategic defence review contains both organisational changes and establishment increases of 3,300 Regular Army personnel to address overstretch. It is a difficult task, but we have made it a priority and I am pleased to be able to tell the House that, as of today, there are 1,500 more soldiers in the British Army than there were when we took office on 1 May last year.

Mrs. Gilroy: Can my hon. Friend assure us that some of the extra manpower will be put towards the support services, which were so badly hollowed out by the previous Government?

Dr. Reid: I can assure my hon. Friend that that will be done, both in the Regular Army and in the context of the role that we envisage for the Territorial Army. We want to do that in all three services, and that includes attending to the gapping in the Royal Navy, in which I know my hon. Friend also has a particular interest. I do not underestimate the problems that we inherited from the previous Government, but it is Government's first duty when young men and women join our armed forces to make sure that the manpower is suitable for the task. The Government are committed to doing that, and that is why I am pleased to announce that there are 1,500 more places in the Army than when we came into government.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Minister's answer related to peace-time overstretch, which is extremely important. My question is about overstretch in terms of our involvement in a war that turns out to need more forces than are currently available. How quickly could we regenerate reserve combat units complete with company commanders, squadron sergeant-majors and so on?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman is the darling—sometimes the Captain Darling—of the Territorial Army. I know that he is discomfited by the reduction in numbers, but we envisage a better, more valuable, more relevant, usable role for the TA as part of our force for the future. We do not envisage putting a heavy division in the field without the TA being called up. We are prepared to show the political willingness to involve it in our planning assumptions, and will call up the Territorial Army at a lower threshold than any Government have done for 50 years. We will pass to the TA training and skills on some of the equipment that has previously been monopolised by the Regular Army. Of course, we have a range of readiness to meet modern threats rather than the threats of the cold war. I assure the hon. Gentleman that that readiness consideration was a central part of our strategic defence review and that we are satisfied that it can be met in the regular and in the reserve forces.

Training

13. **Ms Christine Russell** (City of Chester): What plans his Department has to improve the extent of accredited training in the armed forces. [49588]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): We announced as part of the strategic defence review our new learning forces initiative, which will further improve education and training provisions in the armed services and help service people to gain recognised qualifications.

Ms Russell: Does my right hon. Friend agree that improving education and training will not only make the armed forces a more attractive career proposition but help to ease people's transition back into civilian life? In the next few weeks, thousands of young people will receive their GCSE and NVQ results and will be thinking about their options, so will he say exactly what vocational qualifications the Ministry is considering?

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The services offer a rewarding and excellent career to many school leavers, and we want to ensure that as many as possible of those young people and their advisers have the relevant information. The fact that people can gain transferable, portable qualifications is not only an important recruiting commodity: it adds to the quality of our trained manpower and womanpower. The learning forces initiative will add a new ingredient to the package that is already on offer; people will be able to build up learning credits while they are in the forces, which will allow and encourage them to go into higher and further education when they leave. We believe that the package will be attractive not only to those who are in the services, but, perhaps more important, to the high-quality young people whom we want to come into the forces in the future.

Defence Establishments (Shoeburyness)

14. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): How many letters he has received from the public about the future of defence establishments in Shoeburyness. [49589]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): Since May 1997, the Ministry of Defence has received seven letters from members of the public about the future of defence establishments in Shoeburyness.

Sir Teddy Taylor: As there is real concern in Shoeburyness, which is an area of high unemployment, that a change of policy by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency will cause even more unemployment, is the Minister or one of his colleagues willing to come to Shoeburyness to discuss with the trade unions and management the future of the ranges, particularly as decisions seem to have been delayed time and again?

Mr. Spellar: I understand that my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement has discussed this subject with the hon. Gentleman and that he has received representations from Members of Parliament and from the trade unions at all three of the ranges—Eskmeals, Pendine and Shoeburyness. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the final considerations are being made. Demand has lessened and there must be a balance between the various ranges, but I assure him that the representations that have been made by Members of Parliament, the community, local councils and the trade unions have been given serious and weighty consideration.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Privy Council

34. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What plans she has to review the modus operandi of the Privy Council. [49610]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I have no plans to do so.

Mr. Prentice: That surprises me, as the role of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council will obviously change, as it will have to determine the vires of Acts of the new Scottish Parliament. What is the point of the secrecy of the oath that is sworn by Privy Councillors, and how does such secrecy square with the Government's commitment to freedom of information? Is it not about time that we shone a light into this secret corner of the constitution?

Mrs. Taylor: If my hon. Friend tabled a question asking for the text of the oath, I should be happy to answer it.

European Parliament

35. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If she will take steps to improve liaison between officers of the House and officers of the European Parliament. [49611]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons recently reported on the scrutiny of European business. One of its recommendations was for a national Parliament office in Brussels, the practicalities of which are being examined.

Miss McIntosh: What knowledge of languages do our officers have to operate such an office? What will their duties be? Will they monitor and scrutinise legislation as it goes through both Houses of Parliament?

Mrs. Taylor: Such issues were considered in the discussions held by the Modernisation Committee and the Select Committee on European Legislation. It was thought that it would be helpful if hon. Members had a representative in Brussels to be the eyes and ears of this House to give early warning of matters that might arise. It is early days in terms of considering the practicalities of such an approach, but the idea seems promising and therefore worthy of further examination.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Should we not be our own eyes and ears? Sending functionaries from here and accepting functionaries from Strasbourg is one way forward, but it sounds like a new set of jollies for the boys. Is my right hon. Friend aware of the extraordinary number of delegations of Members from other national Parliaments who come to the House, so interested and enthusiastic are they to learn about new Labour, the third way and what we are up to? Is not the real answer to empower more of our own Members of Parliament to go to Bonn, Paris or Rome to build contacts between the national Parliaments and, when Switzerland joins the European Union, to Berne as well? Should not hon. Members be making contacts with other national parliamentarians to increase oversight of what happens in Europe?

Mrs. Taylor: I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in such matters, that he endeavours to enlighten conferences in other countries about the workings of this Parliament, and that he is very keen to improve the relationship between hon. Members here and Members of other domestic Parliaments in Europe. It assists the House if we use all our ideas as to how we can keep in touch with Brussels. I agree that we need to examine the way in which hon. Members can keep in touch. My hon. Friend has made interesting suggestions to the Modernisation Committee and others.

I think I am right in saying that the majority of hon. Members do not use the single entitlement that they have to visit European institutions. Perhaps if more did so, there would be a greater understanding in this House of European institutions and a greater understanding there of the concerns of British Members of Parliament.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the right hon. Lady reject the negative and insular views of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) and encourage the greatest possible communication between this Parliament, which is very efficient, and the European Parliament, as that might be a way to persuade the European Parliament to stop the scandalous abuses of public money involved in its organisation? Does the right hon. Lady accept that the organisational expenditure of the European Parliament is an insult to democracy?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman's question goes rather wide, but, on principle, it is important that we all have as much information as possible.

Parliamentary Calendar

36. **Mr. David Hanson** (Delyn): What representations she has received on her proposals for modernising the parliamentary calendar. [49612]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I know that the Modernisation Committee will be grateful to all hon. Members who have responded to the invitation to comment on the proposals for modernising the parliamentary calendar. I know that the Committee will welcome any further representations from hon. Members who have not replied up to now. So far, I have received more than 40 letters from hon. Members and several letters from members of the public. They are generally supportive of the proposals contained in the Government's memorandum, although some are opposed and others argue for far more radical steps to be taken.

Mr. Hanson: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the proposals that she has put to the Modernisation Committee are greatly welcomed by many hon. Members? Will she further confirm that not one moment

of parliamentary time will be lost by the proposals, but that the time will simply be reorganised so that many hon. Members who, like me, represent constituencies 225 miles from the House can get home at midnight on Thursdays rather than at 3 am on Fridays?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that no parliamentary time would be lost by the proposed changes. The idea behind the proposals is to allow Members of Parliament to adopt a more balanced approach to the very many competing demands on their time, and being in their constituencies on Friday is a priority for many hon. Members.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Many hon. Members will have seen the *Mail on Sunday* yesterday in which the right hon. Lady set out her philosophy on modernising the House of Commons. Will she confirm that it is her intention to make progress on the same basis as the Jopling Committee, namely by co-operation and consent?

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Committee, knows that it has attempted to reach consensus on the way forward. He will also know that, like most Committee members and Ministers, I think that it would be best for us to adopt such proposals on an experimental basis, so that all hon. Members can judge whether they are an improvement on current arrangements.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend intending to consult all the Departments of the House before she goes ahead with the changes? It would be unhelpful if the House were seen to be the type of employer that does not consult before changes are made with all the Departments that would be directly affected.

Mrs. Taylor: I have already written to the Chairmen of all the relevant Committees, who supervise the Departments of the House. We are waiting for their responses.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the President of the Council aware that the letter from you, Madam Speaker, in response to the Modernisation Committee's ill-thought-out proposals has been an inspiration to many hon. Members, and that it has the whole-hearted support of many who rather think that the House's traditions far outweigh any scramble to implement poorly thought-out reforms?

Mrs. Taylor: All hon. Members are entitled to ensure that their views are known by the Modernisation Committee. I hope that many hon. Members will follow the right hon. Gentleman's example and ensure that the Modernisation Committee is aware of their views.

Speaker's Chaplain

3.30 pm

Madam Speaker: I have a short statement to make before the Deputy Prime Minister's statement.

Hon. Members will be aware that Canon Donald Gray is to retire as Speaker's Chaplain on 31 October. I can now inform the House that I have appointed as his successor the Rev. Canon Robert Wright, vicar of Portsea and honorary canon of Portsmouth cathedral, who is shortly to become a canon of Westminster. Canon Wright will take up his duties as Speaker's Chaplain at the beginning of November.

I should like to take this opportunity to express my thanks—and, I am sure, those of all hon. Members—to Donald Gray for his exceptional contribution to the life of the House of Commons during his 11 years as Chaplain. He has been a true friend to very many of us—certainly to me—and his warmth and compassion, as well as his learning, have been a feature of Parliament for the past decade. He and Joyce will take with them the gratitude and good wishes of the House in their well-deserved retirement.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Integrated Transport Policy

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on transport policy. A White Paper, "New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" is published today and has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. It delivers on our manifesto commitment to develop an integrated transport policy, to assist mobility and economic growth, to fight congestion and pollution, and to help create a fairer society. It will widen choice, providing people with the real alternative of a decent, modern and reliable public transport system.

The public mood has changed. The previous Government's Green Paper, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, the Select Committee and our own consultation exercise have all demonstrated that there is now a consensus for radical change. Everyone now agrees that no change is not an option.

Privatisation and deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s produced a public transport system that was fragmented, lacked investment and attracted fewer passengers—[HON. MEMBERS: "Nonsense."] I am merely repeating the record. Privatisation and deregulation led to more congestion and did more damage to the environment and public health. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Last year, two records were broken: a record 1 million rail passengers complained, and a record number of rail millionaires were created. What an indictment of privatisation. Since deregulation, the number of bus passengers has fallen by 25 per cent. Car drivers sit in traffic for hours. The Confederation of British Industry complains of the £15 billion cost of congestion. Walking and cycling are often unpleasant and dangerous. Many women fear for their own safety on public transport, and for the safety of their children going to school.

If we do nothing, traffic will grow by 30 per cent. in the next 20 years, with more traffic jams, longer rush hours, and a 10 per cent. increase in CO_2 emissions, at a time when the Kyoto accords require us to cut emissions.

The core of our approach is integration—to allow people to switch from bus to train and from their cars to park and ride. It is also about integrating transport with environment policy and land-use planning, with our economic, health, and education policies and with the creation of a fairer society.

People need better information to achieve a seamless journey. Today, I can announce a revolution in information to the passenger. We will introduce a comprehensive integrated national public transport information system by 2000. *[Laughter.]* Obviously hon. Members have not tried ringing transport inquiries to find out how to use the public transport system. It is generally agreed in the country at large that new public information systems are absolutely necessary. A passenger will be able to access information on all forms of transport to a single point by phone, teletext or internet.

Through better planning policies, we can reduce the need to travel, as we are showing with our millennium village in Greenwich. *[Laughter.]* Planning is an essential part of transport, as the previous Administration failed to understand, which is why our transport system is in such

a mess. Homes should be close to shops, schools, health and other services, so that people can walk rather than drive. We will revise planning guidance to take account of our new integrated transport policy. We have given more emphasis than any previous Government to making it easier to walk and cycle. I endorse the target to double cycling within six years.

Rural areas have their own specific needs. Seventy-five per cent. of rural parishes now have no daily bus service, thanks to a deregulated bus system introduced by the previous Administration. We have already committed £150 million to improving rural public transport, doubling the support in many rural areas, and proposals are in the final stages of preparation.

Better public transport—particularly rail and bus—is the cornerstone of our approach, and a better, modern, reliable bus represents the best opportunity for leading a renaissance of public transport. Quality partnerships which already existed under the previous Administration in a handful of local authorities have proved popular with the public. Passenger numbers have increased by up to 40 per cent., and fewer people are using their cars. I want to see more such partnerships.

The bus must have priority on the road. That will lead to faster, more reliable services, which attract more passengers. Stiffer penalties and tougher enforcement will deter bus lane road hogs.

We can transform the economics of the bus industry by adding just two extra passengers per bus journey, and thereby improving revenues by more than £400 million. More revenue will lead to more investment, better buses, more frequent services, and proper training and conditions for bus drivers. The one I met yesterday could benefit from a visit to charm school—*[Interruption.]*—as could a number of Opposition Members—probably the same one that I attended.

Bus operators must help to spruce up bus stations, provide better information at bus stops, and co-operate on ticketing with other bus and rail operators. In addition, the Government are prepared to give statutory force to exclusive quality contracts on particular routes. The days of the cowboy bus operators are over.

For too long, the bus has been seen as a workhorse. I would like it to be a racehorse—*[Interruption.]*—and a first-class one, too. *[Interruption.]* You will have to control the zoo, Madam Speaker.

Today, I am issuing a challenge to bus companies and manufacturers to create a new bus fit for the 21st century in design, operation and comfort. We need buses that are more accessible to elderly and disabled people, and to mothers with children and heavy shopping.

Transport policy needs to pay special attention to the 13 million people in homes without a car. Pensioners in particular rely on good-quality services at affordable prices. I am therefore pleased to announce for the first time a national minimum concessionary fares scheme, guaranteeing at least a half fare for every pensioner in Britain. That will benefit 3 million pensioners who are currently denied the benefits of such a scheme.

Our proposals for railways are in line with the unanimous recommendations of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, the response to which I am issuing today as Cmnd 4024. There is going to be tougher regulation of train companies. Spearheaded by our new strategic rail authority, enforcement will be speeded up and strengthened by tougher penalties. If companies continue to fail to honour their contractual obligations to the passenger, they will lose their right to operate. In the short term, the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising will remain the operator of last resort, and British Rail will retain the ability to be a train operator. The functions of both will become part of the strategic rail authority.

The rail industry needs a stable framework to deliver long-term investment and better services for passengers. In the next six years, 17 of the franchises come up for renewal. Some train operators want early renegotiation of their franchises. I stand ready to consider their requests, but I should make one thing clear. If any application is to succeed, it will have to guarantee better performance, more investment, improvements for rail passengers and value for the taxpayer. An independent rail regulator will remain, but there will be clear demarcation between the regulator's responsibilities and the new responsibilities of the strategic rail authority.

Railtrack will be tightly scrutinised to ensure that it invests sufficiently in the rail infrastructure. The rail regulator has been critical of Railtrack's investment record as recently as last week. I intend to see that those criticisms are addressed, and that matters are corrected. I have asked the rail regulator to carry out a review of the level and structure of charges, including mechanisms for payment. We will set up new rail funds with £100 million to lever in additional leading-edge investment in the rail network.

The House is aware that the National Audit Office condemned the scandalous sale by the previous Government of the rolling stock leasing companies, known as roscos. I asked the rail regulator to investigate the failure of roscos—he has completed that—and to negotiate a new concordat with them on the leasing and re-leasing terms of rolling stock. If that is not effective, I will consider bringing roscos under formal regulation.

Rail freight is a better environmental option, and we endorse the rail freight industry's target to double traffic carried by rail in five years and to treble it in 10. We have already doubled rail freight grants. We will increase them by a further one third this year, and extend them to coastal shipping. It is my intention to reinvest the proceeds from the part sale of National Air Traffic Services in transport improvements, such as a Euro-gauge freight rail system from the channel tunnel right through to Scotland, if terms can be agreed.

This Government will invest in rail freight, although we recognise that more than 90 per cent. of goods will continue to be moved by road. From 1 January next year, European law requires us to raise the maximum gross weight of lorries from 38 tonnes to 40 tonnes. I am concerned about the cost of road and bridge maintenance with an increase in five-axle heavy lorries, and therefore want to give the strongest possible encouragement to the use of six-axle lorries. I have therefore decided to allow 41-tonne lorries on six axles from January 1999. I am not convinced of the case for 44-tonne lorries, but I will ask the new commission for integrated transport, which I will describe later, to review the evidence and make recommendations.

Everyone now acknowledges that we cannot build our way out of congestion; the days of predict and provide are over. We will give top priority to maintaining and

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managing roads. I propose to transform the Highways Agency into a network operator rather than simply a road builder. I am pleased to announce the signing today of an historic agreement between the Highways Agency and Railtrack to work together on developing integrated solutions.

We will allow the Highways Agency to operate a number of pilot charging schemes, and use the income stream to reinvest in the road network. For example, I am looking at how to redirect toll revenue from the Dartford crossing to improve traffic management on the M25.

Like millions of my fellow drivers, I know that sitting in traffic jams at all times of the day robs driving of its convenience. It is not pro-car to allow congestion to escalate. It is not pro-car to allow smog and pollution to increase. The car driver is breathing air around three times more polluted than the air outside. The most anti-car policy is to do nothing. Being pro-public transport does not mean being anti-car.

I am pleased to announce today a new deal for the motorist. [*Laughter.*] Hon. Members may laugh about improving conditions for motorists, but many complain bitterly, through the motoring organisations, that there are actions that the Government could take, although the previous Administration failed to do so. The Highways Agency will have specific responsibility to reduce delays. We will establish regional traffic control centres to help traffic flows and improve information to motorists about roadworks and delays. We will also act against cowboy wheel clampers, and we will use the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's databank to provide better information and protection for drivers when buying used cars.

As school holidays begin, everyone notices the difference in traffic. Parents driving their children often short distances to school increases congestion significantly at peak times. Some schools have already shown that safe and secure routes, with adult supervision, can reduce unnecessary car use. Parents welcome that, as an extension of choice and a safer alternative.

No transport issue is more important than safety. We intend to issue a new road safety strategy and targets later this year. In response to the Select Committee, we propose to carry out a thorough review of the institutional arrangements for transport safety. *[Interruption.]* The reviews are being carried out by the health and safety bodies, and they need time to conclude them.

The key to the success of our new approach to transport is partnership. Let no one say that we are not putting our money where our mouth is. We have made a £1.7 billion increase in public investment for transport over the next three years, and we are setting up £7 billion-worth of public-private partnerships for the underground and a £6 billion partnership for the channel tunnel rail link, which collapsed under the previous Administration's negotiations.

Together with new revenue streams for local authorities, commercial freedom for local authority airports, and private investment in buses and trains, this represents the biggest ever investment in public transport. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said, we are doubling total transport investment over the next seven years.

Partnership will also be important at local level. Local councils will consult all the main interested parties to draw up local transport plans. The plans will set targets and identify actions to develop public transport, improve air quality, enhance road safety and reduce road traffic. This major new initiative will be backed by £700 million, which will enable the development of 150 local transport strategies over the next three years. There will be new powers for local authorities to levy charges on the use of congested roads and on workplace parking. Revenue from this will be used to improve local public transport and traffic management.

These will be local schemes decided by local people, defined by local needs. Proceeds will be reinvested in local transport through a ring-fenced fund. All such plans will be subject to the approval of the Secretary of State. The White Paper establishes the principle. I intend to issue a consultation paper in due course on its implementation.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for having the courage to establish—*[Laughter.]* No other Government have been prepared to do it. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for having the courage to establish such a radical reform of public finances, allowing hypothecation of the income—something which was not even in the 1996 Green Paper, when the previous Administration discovered integration after 17 years of failure in transport policy. The Government are ending decades of under-investment, modernising our transport system, and investing for the future.

Transport must be publicly accountable. I intend to give real power to the passenger. There will be public hearings on rail and bus franchises; stronger bus and rail consumer bodies, joining forces with real powers; and a strategic rail authority with real teeth to improve standards for the passenger.

The White Paper is the start, not the end, of the debate. It is almost 20 years since the last comprehensive transport White Paper. In 18 years, the previous Government produced only a Green Paper on transport at the end of their Administration. The speed of change means that we cannot wait another 20 years. Hon. Members will appreciate that I have only touched on the main points of the White Paper, which covers all forms of transport. There will be a number of "daughter documents"—similar to today's rail document—on roads, freight, aviation, shipping and others.

Transport policy is not just a matter for Government. The debate needs the involvement of all sections of society. The Government therefore propose to establish an independent commission for integrated transport, which will monitor targets, provide a forum for debate, and make regular reports to Ministers, Committees and this House.

The White Paper is based on a real consensus for change. No change, frankly, is not an option. The country wants a better transport system which does not continue to damage our health, industry and environment. The country wants a transport system which improves the quality of life for everyone without passing on a poorer legacy to future Administrations—as the previous Administration did.

Radical change is necessary. The White Paper is about that radical change and how to achieve it. I commend it the House.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): The White Paper was promised for the spring—it is true that

spring was late this year. It is also the case that the White Paper has been seen, apparently, by lobbyists, journalists, interest groups, local authorities, the world and his wife, but not by Parliament—but, then, the Government like Parliament to be in its place. However, I am grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister for his courtesy in letting me have a copy of his statement—at 2.45 this afternoon.

Before the election, the Labour party said a great deal about transport. It promised immediate benefits, an immediate end to planning blight, and radical transport policies. Now the great day has come, and what do we have? We have extra taxes for road users, more regulation, more bureaucracy, and no improvements for the travelling public even promised until after the next election. What a wasted opportunity.

If that is the best that the right hon. Gentleman can do after 14 months of dithering in government, 18 years fulminating in opposition, the £26 billion investment in roads that we left in place, the billions that our policies of privatisation and deregulation have brought into the system, the framework for transport integration laid out in 1996 and our changes in planning guidance, we might as well have been waiting until next spring—unless, of course, teeny-boppers and financial whiz kids overruled the right hon. Gentleman; perhaps we shall hear.

Given the importance of the White Paper in the right hon. Gentleman's own mind, I have a number of questions. Will he confirm that the increase for transport announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week was creative accounting within his existing departmental budget, and that the real increase was not the £600 million announced by the Chancellor—that is per annum—but £7 million, as calculated by the British Roads Federation?

Is it not the case that the so-called extra funding of £1.8 billion is made up largely from the proceeds of reducing subsidies to the privatised railways? Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore confirm his conversion to the cause of that privatisation, given the benefits that our policy is affording him?

Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify what he means by British Rail "retaining the ability" to be a train operator? Is he saying that British Rail has the right to compete for franchises, for example?

Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he plans to remove all the subsidy to London Underground by the year 2000? Will he tell the House what assumptions he has made about the likely private investment in London Underground by the year 2000? What contingency plans has he made in the event of those plans failing, and what would be the consequent effect on fares and overcrowding?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he intends to fund his plans for improvements in transport infrastructure by imposing more taxes on road users? By how much does he intend that taxation to increase, and how soon will the consequent improvements be in place? How will he guarantee 100 per cent. hypothecation of those taxes, and what system will he put in place to ensure transparency? Can he guarantee that the Treasury will not take its slice of the taxes and charges by imposing VAT on top?

The right hon. Gentleman made rather little of this in his statement, but I refer him and the House to the very useful graph in paragraph 236 of last week's comprehensive spending review, where the new income assumptions are clearly shown. Does he accept that higher taxation for motorists will disproportionately affect women, the elderly, people with disabilities and people in rural areas, all of whom regard the car as a necessity, and for all of whom safe and secure travelling by car is a major consideration?

Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that there will be an exemption from workplace parking charges for health and education establishments? What other exemptions does he plan? How will the new income streams generated by the new taxes and charges on motorists affect his Department's assumptions for the distribution of local authority finance?

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, during the past 15 years, there have been massive improvements in the manufacture of cleaner cars? What plans has he to encourage further improvements on the previous Government's record of a 25 per cent. reduction in vehicle emissions during the past five years?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, according to the Road Haulage Association, the increasing differential between United Kingdom and continental diesel prices will lead to the loss of 26,000 UK jobs in this Parliament, and what does he intend to do about it?

I very much welcome the right hon. Gentleman's announcement on rail freight and his tribute to the performance of the privatised companies involved. I hope that his appreciation will further encourage his conversion to the cause of privatisation.

How is the right hon. Gentleman's proposal on land use planning compatible with his wish that 2.2 million new homes be built in the countryside? Should new homes be built so far from the jobs and services on which they depend?

Will the right hon. Gentleman now be specific with the House and with the nation? How does he propose to measure the success of his policies? Will he set targets for the overall reductions of traffic growth, the increase in train and bus travel and the number of journeys made by cycle and on foot, and how would he monitor and enforce those targets?

The White Paper has been leaked, hyped and, my word, oversold. It promised action. It is delivering more taxes, a phone-in opportunity, more regulation, a new commission, a new authority, 152 new transport committees, some regional transport centres, a shower of documents, several pilots and—of course—two reviews. It owes nothing to Labour's pre-election promises or, perhaps, even to the right hon. Gentleman's views. It owes everything to focus groups, dithering, interference from No. 10 Downing street and confiscation by the Treasury, and it confirms that, in last week's spending announcement, the right hon. Gentleman was the loser, and so were the travelling public.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) will be aware that it was correct for me to give her a copy of the statement three quarters of an hour before the statement was to be made in the House, and that I acted appropriately.

The right hon. Lady complained about the long wait for the White Paper. I explained to the House that it was right and proper for it to be published after the comprehensive spending review and the conclusions on transport. It is a

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bit much for her to criticise me, given that her party was in power for 18 years and produced only a Green Paper on transport. After a little more than 12 months in office, I have produced a Green Paper and a White Paper. That is an acceptable speed for dealing with a matter as important as transport, especially when compared with the Conservatives' record.

The right hon. Lady complained about the changes that we intend to make in order to achieve an integrated transport policy and find new revenues for it. That was the obvious conclusion not only in her Government's Green Paper, but from our own observations and discussions during consultation. The policies that she now rejects were summed up in her Government's Green Paper in 1996, which stated:

"The Government will therefore discuss with the Local Authority Associations and other interested parties how best to take matters forward on these topics, with a presumption in favour of introducing legislation, in due course, to enable congestion charging and area licensing to be implemented, and is prepared to consider Local Authority Associations'"

with all their transport committees

"arguments on the taxation of private non-residential parking."

That was after 17 years of a Tory Government. If there was ever an indictment of a policy pursued by the Administration, it was their own conclusion—the same as we have arrived at—that it is time for change, and that no change is not a way forward.

On the proposals for charging and for swinging to public transport, the same consultation paper said that the objective of any future transport policy—which the previous Government did not have an opportunity to implement, having lost the election—was to persuade people to use public transport more and to use their cars less. Charging, about which the right hon. Lady complains so bitterly, was to be an element of that policy.

Nevertheless, the right hon. Lady's point is correct. We will have to find new income streams. For her to complain that the resources of £1.7 billion are now reduced to £7 million, on the advice of a PR agency, is a bit much. I bitterly regret the comments about my White Paper. No PR agency has had access to this White Paper. That was a story in the press. There is no evidence. I feel very strongly that the first body to whom I speak about the contents of the White Paper should be the House of Commons.

I regret the leaks that may have occurred in other cases, but, as the right hon. Lady pointed out, the main discussion has been about the table in the comprehensive spending review, which clearly showed extra new forms of income. That was stated, the press speculated on it, and there has been much argument and intelligent discussion about the implications of those charges.

I can assure the right hon. Lady that there will be a consultation document to examine how they might apply, who will be exempt, and whether charges will apply to hospitals and such places. There are major questions to be answered. The House will properly expect the Government to produce a consultation document. Of course I will do that, as I said in my statement.

With regard to British Rail and the arguments about privatisation and the use of resources, about £1 billion was spent in preparing for rail privatisation. The loss of those public assets, sold to the private sector, turned people into millionaires. Under the previous Administration, the subsidies given by the state in public service obligation payments rose from £1 billion to £2 billion. The private sector received twice the subsidy that the previous Government were prepared to give British Rail, and, having been given twice as much subsidy, of course it would appear to do better.

The freight industry is another example. I inherited a deal—which, unfortunately, I could not stop—whereby the previous Administration sold off the railway companies, gave a £250 million dowry along with that sale, and guaranteed that there would be no charges to travel through the channel tunnel until 2005. If those concessions had been given to the state sector, it would have been able to offer increased freight services.

A prejudiced Administration's loaded game against the public sector led to a transport policy that saw fewer goods carried by rail, more people travelling on congested roads, a worsening environment, and all the other problems that we have highlighted in our criticisms of that Administration.

The shadow Secretary of State referred to transport services in rural areas and for the disabled. She should bear in mind the fact that a third of people in this country have no access to cars; their only option is public transport. Under her Administration, public transport services were reduced and made less available, and prices increased far more than those associated with car use. Those people paid the penalty for the previous Government's failed transport system. In those circumstances, there is no reason for us to offer any apologies about these matters.

I think that the commission for integrated transport could examine the targets that the shadow Secretary of State highlighted. Those targets include measuring the reduction in car use, and calculating how many more people use public transport and how many would take up cycling opportunities. Those are the sorts of targets that should be established, assessed every year and reported to the House in order to gauge the Government's effectiveness in implementing the White Paper and the integrated transport policy. We will be measured on the success of our policies, and we are prepared to be so.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): You have no targets.

Mr. Prescott: Targets have been set for greenhouse gas emissions and CO_2 gases. We are setting targets for cycling and for a reduction in car use. The consultation documents will establish those targets in the transport plans.

As for the transparency of those plans, the shadow Secretary of State will be aware that local authorities already issue transport policies and programmes, in which targets between local and central Government have been agreed for a long time. We shall ensure that there is decent transport for everyone. The reactions so far, particularly from the press and the public at large, show that the time for change has arrived—and we intend to lead it.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that this is the first time in 18 years that a Government have set down an integrated, sensible and responsible transport policy? Is he aware also

that the fact that he inherited such chaos and fragmentation, yet has come to the House with an imaginative, sensible plan for the future, is a great credit to him and to his commitment?

We shall expect the strategic rail authority to be much more responsive to the needs of the customer, and we welcome the extra funds for rail freight. Will it be possible to formulate soon a policy for aviation, which is fundamental to the economic benefits of this country? Many people in rural areas who are currently extremely badly served by all forms of public transport will have listened with astonishment to today's performance by the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her remarks, and her support. I am particularly grateful for the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee's work on the strategic rail authority and other transport matters. My hon. Friend knows that we have published today a Command Paper in response to her Committee's work. Our White Paper reflects the unanimous opinion arrived at in the Committee, across party lines, about the way to improve the railway system. Those ideas involve the strategic rail authority, and I am grateful for that support.

Aviation and airports are an important issue, involving the development of open skies in Europe, the recent negotiations between ourselves and America culminating in the British Airways-American Airlines deal, and ongoing discussions regarding terminal 5. Some fundamental issues must be decided, many of which are influenced by European regulations and negotiated bilaterally between countries. We intend to deal with those matters and follow them up in the forthcoming document on aviation and airport policy.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The hypocrisy from the Conservative Benches is breathtaking, given that the previous Conservative Government were the Administration that delivered petrol price increases and a cut in the road programme, but no practical action to help motorists and others get from A to B.

As for the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement, perhaps, unlike the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), I shall reserve my judgment on its overall impact until I have the chance to read the full document, which is lengthy. However, there seem to be some missing issues.

There is no real action to tackle the self-interests of the out-of-town super-stores. There are no parking charges for them, despite recommendations from the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. It seems that there is no action to change the company car tax system, which currently rewards the gas guzzler for ever more miles and penalises those using public transport. Above all, there is no target for traffic reduction, either year by year or as an ultimate objective, although the right hon. Gentleman said that there would be one. If there will be one, will he tell the House what it will be, so that we can judge him against it as he invited us to do?

Is the Deputy Prime Minister able to announce a review of the Government's own use of cars by Departments, not least by Ministers themselves? Indeed, are we to anticipate, as I hope we are, charges both for Ministers and other Members for the free parking that takes place right here in the heart of central London?

May we anticipate that the right hon. Gentleman has secured a legislative slot for action on these matters, especially on congestion charging and business parking, which were promised to local authorities, and without which they will not be able to take forward local transport plans that the right hon. Gentleman rightly talks about? After all, it was the previous Conservative Government who last proposed them, back in 1996. If we do not get these measures in the next legislative timetable, it will not be until the new millennium that any action begins to start. In that case, what is the difference from the Tories?

Mr. Prescott: Liberals are always holier than holy, aren't they?

A number of the questions that have been asked by the hon. Gentleman are under review. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made it clear that he wants to look at company car tax. He thinks that it is a crazy way of encouraging people to drive cars to get the allowance, and to drive greater mileages than necessary. That is under review.

As for the target reduction to which the hon. Gentleman referred, we have already given draft guidance to local authorities about that. Nationally, we wanted to be sure about our negotiations in Kyoto. Thankfully, under the presidency of the British Administration, we were able to secure not only the Kyoto agreement but the Brussels or Luxembourg agreement. Our target now is a 12.5 per cent. reduction.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Traffic.

Mr. Prescott: I know. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not made the connection. Exhaust gas comes out of a car, and if there are fewer cars moving, there is a reduction in gas emission. Targets for cars and reductions are an essential part of the process. By the end of the year, we will be producing a sustainable document setting out what contributions can be made towards those ends. There will be variations from town to town. There should be discussions with local authorities rather than a blanket target.

I encourage everyone to read the White Paper and to come to a judgment later. I hope that people will do precisely that. As for legislation, it is for the legislative committees to determine the priorities of legislation. I cannot say any more on that. The House can be sure that the White Paper has a demand on the legislative programme, and we intend to make that the position.

Madam Speaker: Mr. Peter Snape.

Mr. Prescott *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Does the Secretary of State wish to come back?

Mr. Prescott *indicated dissent.*

Madam Speaker: No—take another opportunity. The right hon. Gentleman has answered a lot of questions already.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): I shall be as helpful as ever, Madam Speaker.

[Mr. Peter Snape]

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on what, I know, is for him the culmination of many years of enthusiastic work in this area of policy. May I press him on enforcement of bus priorities? My right hon. Friend mentioned the need to enforce the law on bus lanes, but there are other matters, such as parking and loading and unloading at bus stops. Does he intend to press the Home Office to allow local authorities to be responsible for this area of enforcement? As he says, they are to keep the money, anyway.

Finally, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on resisting the temptation to allow 44-tonne lorries on to Britain's roads, something which the Conservative party would have done had the nation been unwise enough to re-elect it last May. Does he agree that those lorries, which are the heaviest, are the most subsidised by the community, do the most damage to our roads, and directly oppose and compete with long-distance rail freight? For those reasons, they should be resisted.

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his compliments and can confirm that we are discussing with the Home Office precisely how to deal with people who disobey the regulations and enter bus priority lanes, causing great difficulties and delaying buses. Such people are much resented by other motorists who stay in the correct lane and observe the law. We are considering many penalties in respect of these matters, and, with the Home Office, we hope to make a statement shortly.

On 44 or 41-tonne lorries, I resisted the arguments, and I do not think that the case has been made that the number of lorry movements would be reduced by moving to 44 tonnes, but I wanted to signal that 41 tonnes was more than I was expected to do in respect of the European regulations. I hope to encourage a move to six-axle vehicles, which are less damaging to the roads; maintenance bills are massive, so it would be more helpful if we did that.

I am quite prepared to leave my mind open and to see what the report from the commission for integrated transport says on whether the balance between rail and road can be achieved by moving to 44-tonne lorries, but let me be frank—I want more to go on rail. That would give the rail industry a number of years to reach the targets that it has set out and which I have endorsed, without being undermined by the challenge of the 44-tonne lorries.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): On dedicated revenue streams, will the right hon. Gentleman make it clear that all the money will be ring-fenced and that it may be applied to transport schemes, and not be siphoned off by the Treasury? Will he also make it clear that his Department will not make assumptions about revenue support grant and take sums equivalent to that revenue away from local councils?

Will the right hon. Gentleman correct the impression he gave that the previous Government were in favour of taxing workplace parking? Their Green Paper clearly stated:

"The Government would not favour allowing the taxation of private non-residential parking."

Will he make that absolutely clear?

Mr. Prescott: No. I made it clear that private non-residential parking will be subjected to review in the consultation document—these are charges to be taken into account. On whether that income would go directly to one source—local authority transport plans—all charges are subjected to value added tax and other taxation arrangements. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members have not yet learnt that they imposed that, and that the charges that the Conservative party brought in subject them to tax.

In these arrangements, hypothecation means directing that money to transport improvements. I do not envisage that to affect other local authority transport expenditure; this is additional money, but I shall want to know what are their plans for transport policies and programmes, which they have to agree with me before they can even get to the stage of raising money and agreeing the priorities of expenditure.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I congratulate the whole ministerial team on the vision in the White Paper? There is a problem, however: in the dark years of Conservatism in the 1980s, when Mrs. Thatcher was Prime Minister, almost the whole of Britain's bus manufacturing capacity was destroyed, including the Leyland Bus plant in my constituency, which was able to produce almost 3,000 buses a year. With Volvo's recent decision to place bus orders with a manufacturer in Poland, there is almost nothing left of the United Kingdom's bus manufacturing capacity. Can we have a strategy to rebuild Britain's bus manufacturing industry? Perhaps it might return to Workington one day.

Mr. Prescott: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. One of the casualties of the privatisation and deregulation of the bus industry was continuity of investment. Buses got older because company owners found it more profitable not to invest in new ones, but to pay off the debts of purchasing the company. That led to such an uneven demand that the bus industry collapsed. Indeed, we have effectively seen the destruction of the bus manufacturing industry in this country.

However, there is still some manufacturing left, and I should like to see that built on. I look forward to a future in which the transport industry is geared towards assisting our manufacturing industry by providing new investment. Those are the resources that I have talked about, which are embodied in the White Paper.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Although I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's conversion to the merits of rail privatisation, I wish that he had said a little more about the record growth in passenger numbers on the railways since privatisation. May I ask him about roads? As a result of the transport supplementary grant settlement, will there be any money for local bypasses, such as the urgently needed Wyre-Piddle bypass in my constituency? Will he tell local authorities that environmentally unsustainable new settlements for commuters in the countryside will no longer be tolerated?

Mr. Prescott: Did the hon. Gentleman say "Why a piddle?" bypass? *[Laughter.]*

We shall change the priorities to ensure that many bypasses are built so that villages are safer and healthier places in which to live. Improving the roads programme

will be a priority. Next week, a statement will be made about the roads programme, which will be relevant to the hon. Gentleman's question.

I am not a convert to privatisation; I still believe in a publicly owned, publicly accountable system. Once we have secured the investment for the channel tunnel rail link and the underground, those will return to public ownership.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): In welcoming the ring fencing of money raised from roads and parking charges to fund local transport improvements, may I ask my right hon. Friend carefully to consider the taxation of air traffic pollution—both air and noise pollution—and ring-fencing the proceeds to local public transport schemes? For instance, as air traffic from Gatwick and Heathrow grows, my constituents in Croydon are paying the price of worsening air and noise pollution. They would welcome new investment in public transport.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes a fair point about air traffic pollution. It is a matter we want to look at in our review of aviation policy. However, any changes to the fuel used or to air traffic pollution internationally requires international agreement. We shall deal with that point in our paper on aviation.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): So that we may know how much new money there really is, will the Deputy Prime Minister say by how much the rail transport subsidy will be cut—how much he will save by reducing it—how much of that will be spent on his public transport programme, and what proportion of the extra money to which he refers that represents?

Mr. Prescott: For the reduction in subsidies, we shall have to wait until the franchises are renegotiated, which some franchisees are now asking for. In some cases—as in the case of Connex—it is clear that they want more subsidies. Renegotiation of some of the franchise agreements may be completed before their seven years are up. At the present stage, we envisage a considerable reduction—some £1 billion—in the privatisation fund. The fund started at £2 billion, and I think that it went down to about £1.6 billion, so we envisage a further reduction in those payments.

However, even if those targets are achieved, any money will go straight back to the Treasury rather than simply into transport, which is why the changes we have made are extremely important. The new streams of income that we have introduced will come directly to transport. It is like saying that savings are being made. The Conservatives doubled the subsidy to underpin privatisation, and the state sector received only £1 billion. That was hardly an example of good management of resources by the previous Administration.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister, particularly on his announcement about concessionary fares. May I be a bit parochial for a moment? He referred to the Dartford-Thurrock crossing and the use of toll charges to maintain traffic management of the M25. Does he agree that it would be unfair if only the Dartford-Thurrock crossing users paid the bill for M25 traffic management, given that many low-paid people on the north banks of Kent and the south banks of Essex use the crossing to get to work? Should not traffic management costs be met by everyone who uses the M25, including those who live in the rich, leafy lanes of Surrey and elsewhere?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend may have a point. We shall discuss that matter with the various bodies. There is a massive flow of traffic on the M25, and it could do much better if better management techniques were used. That costs money, and it is one way of using some of the resources. As we have made clear in our discussions with the Highways Agency, the possibility of other forms of income remains open.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The Deputy Prime Minister is to be congratulated as, he has concentrated on the chaos created by motor cars. We particularly welcome his statement about concessionary fares for pensioners, which he referred to as a "national" minimum concessionary fare. Will it apply to the nation, or just to England and Wales?

Mr. Prescott: This is when I call a taxi! The national concessionary fare will apply to England and Wales. I do not think that it will apply to Northern Ireland, but I am not sure. The right hon. Gentleman has caught me out, so I shall write to him.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the regeneration of recycled land in north-west Kent, which includes my constituency, will result in up to 50,000 new jobs and 20,000 new houses. That will increase transport needs. Will he be able to assist transport projects, such as the Thames Gateway metro and the Kent Thameside transit system, in alleviating some of the traffic problems that will be generated?

Mr. Prescott: We are considering a number of improvements in the transport corridors. We have already announced investment in the underground and in the channel tunnel link, and the Minister of Transport will be making a statement about road priorities in the south-east. It is an important area, and there has been a tremendous growth in transport. We must get more people in the south-east to change from their cars to public transport. Public transport must be reliable, and the only way to achieve that is to give it the priority that I have talked about in the White Paper.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The right hon. Gentleman talked about using the White Paper to create a fairer society. He also said that people must come to a judgment about his White Paper, and that he wanted to ensure that he put his money where his mouth was. Does he agree that his proposals on workplace charging ensure that taxpayers' money—motorists' money—is being bitten off by the mouth of the Humber?

Mr. Prescott: I shall deal with the facts of the matter. The previous Administration agreed that such charges should be considered. The difference is that I have got them hypothecated: I do not know whether the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) has got the shadow Cabinet to agree to establishing a new principle of hypothecation. We have announced extra

[Mr. Prescott]

money for the channel tunnel link, investments, and changes in the Treasury rules. Those measures will provide a considerable amount of money for the transport system.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): In an attempt to prevent the occupiers of the 20,000 new homes in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) from driving through my constituency, I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on dedicated bus routes and the improvement of bus links. May I draw his attention to the extension of the Jubilee line to north Greenwich, where there is a major arterial road? That will provide a rapid transport link. We need to link bus routes with the London underground network to reduce car use in south-east London. Other than the bus and the car, there is no alternative to the Connex network, which is already overcrowded at peak times.

Mr. Prescott: We must give considerable attention to the ways in which we can make existing capacity work more effectively. I have agreed to the £35-million extension of the docklands light railway to the airport. The number of people travelling on it will increase from 1 million to 3 million, and the time taken to get from the airport to the centre of London will be reduced by almost half. It will reduce congestion on the extraordinarily expensive Limehouse link, which cost £250 million for one mile. We should give priority to linking existing systems and to obtaining new investment.

On my hon. Friend's point about the Jubilee line, my first priority is to modernise what we have rather than to consider further extensions, although we are prepared to examine the priorities involved.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Deputy Prime Minister referred to an increased use of park-and-ride schemes. Can he give us a categorical assurance that such schemes will not be set up on green-belt areas—I am thinking of, for instance, the proposed scheme in Rawcliffe—when other appropriate areas are available?

Have the Government had a chance to cost the impact on shops and small businesses of charging local residents for access to cities at peak time?

Mr. Prescott: Access and congestion charges will have to be the subject of a proper consultation document, and I have promised to produce such a document. As for park-and-ride schemes in green-belt areas, I am in a quasi-judicial position in that regard, and cannot comment. The hon. Lady's constituency, however, is near the city of York, where a scheme that I opened a few years ago when I was the Opposition transport spokesman has been highly successful. People can still do their shopping at supermarkets on the outskirts of York, leave their cars there, and catch buses into town. More and more people are using that scheme, which is an intelligent way of employing the park-and-ride system.

Planning inspectors have to make decisions about these matters, but, if there is a dispute, they are eventually referred to me.

Mr. Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley): In Greater Manchester, a combination of deregulation and privatisation of bus services had, by 1993, led to an extraordinary situation: buses were creating more pollution per passenger mile than cars. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in conurbations such as Greater Manchester, the best way to get people out of their cars is to re-regulate the buses and invest in metrolink?

Mr. Prescott: The deregulated system—particularly in Manchester, where there was a massive conversion from the normal regulated service to a deregulated minibus system—created far more buses in the city, more congestion and more pollution. Frankly, it was a disaster. I believe that there is a role for a regulated form of transport, and what I call the quality contract. As I said in my statement, that is a possible way forward, and we are prepared to consider such proposals on a statutory basis.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): The Government have just helped General Motors to retain its car plant in Luton, thereby saving thousands of jobs there and in the surrounding supply industries. Can I take it from that that the Government will build new roads in the south Bedfordshire industrial area in order to continue to promote economic growth and reduce congestion?

Mr. Prescott: A statement about roads will be made next week. It is obvious, however—"predict and provide" is part of this—that, while it is possible to build more and more motorways, they fill up as fast as they are built, creating even more congestion. The policy must be changed—a conclusion that the previous Administration reached in their Green Paper.

We are not suggesting that cars should be banished, or being hostile to the motorist; we are asking motorists to use their cars less, and public transport more. Elsewhere in Europe, where there are more cars per head, people use them less, because there is a better transport system. In Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Leeds and Brighton, all of which have given priority to public transport, ridership has increased considerably, and people are using their cars less. That is what we are seeking to achieve.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the bold and imaginative way in which he has tackled difficult problems. I approve of charges for congestion and for parking in city centres, but what will be the mechanism for overseeing the way in which local authorities invest in public expenditure schemes? Will there be rigorous oversight, so that we receive value for money, and local authorities learn from one another's best practice?

Mr. Prescott: At present, our local transport plans must be agreed with central Government. Local authorities will have to talk to operators and, indeed, passengers: that will be the method of oversight and control. I do not want consultation to be limited to local government and operators; it should equally involve passengers, who sometimes have a different view even from elected councillors. I expect the plans that are agreed, and expenditure priorities, to be agreed with the community before coming to me. I shall measure them against the targets and guidance that I will provide, and local authorities will then oversee and implement the policy.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Following the Deputy Prime Minister's self-confessed successful visit to a

charm school, will he have the good grace to acknowledge that I and my colleagues argued long and hard during the previous Administration for many of the proposals that he has presented? I welcome local transport packages. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that, when he came to office and faced the shambles of the previous Administration's policies, only about a quarter of the qualifying local transport packages that met the Department's specifications were funded. Can he assure the House that under his plans, all those packages which meet his Department's specifications will be funded?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the charming way in which he asked his question. I shall respond in my charming way.

I have advocated for many years the ideas to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and I am pleased to be in a job where I can begin to implement them. However, Governments can implement only that for which resources allow. I have tried to find new ways of financing, even to the extent of getting changes for local authorities in the Treasury rules to allow greater flexibility to invest. The issue is not only the amount that I can find—almost £2 billion—but about finding new, agreed income streams. As I said in my statement, those new streams will be geared very much to public transport requirements.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): Is my right hon. Friend aware that acid particle emissions from motor vehicles have done more damage to York Minster and the other historic limestone buildings in York in the past 20 years than has been caused in the previous two centuries? Is he further aware that measures such as the park-and-ride schemes introduced by York city council, and its traffic-calming measures and pedestrian and cycle priority schemes, provide necessary alternatives to car use in York? Does he commend those schemes to other authorities?

My right hon. Friend will remember that, when the Conservatives were in power, they closed the York carriage works. Since the election, his transport policies have created a market for rail freight wagons, and a freight works has reopened in York. On Monday, the first freight vehicle will roll off the production line at the Thrall works in York. That shows that the markets, as well as transport specialists, approve of my right hon. Friend's policies.

Mr. Prescott: I was delighted by the opening of that plant, which was scandalously closed under the previous Administration, not because railway stock was not wanted but because they were not prepared to ensure that investment was available. If they had invested in rolling stock instead of using the money to meet the cost of rail privatisation, that plant could have been kept in being, but their ideological requirement was to privatise.

I welcome the advance in freight wagons by the English, Welsh and Scottish Freight Rail Company. My hon. Friend spoke about environmental problems and acid particles. York's excellent policy has not only improved buildings in the area but encouraged more people to cycle. Much more can be done to facilitate cycling, and I think that about 20 per cent. of journeys in York are undertaken in that way. I congratulate the Labour administration in York on its comprehensive policy on these matters.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We must now move on. There will be another important transport statement next week.

International Criminal Court

4.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement.

It has been the Government's policy to back the creation of an effective International Criminal Court. I am pleased to report to the House that in Rome on Friday, Britain was part of the overwhelming majority that agreed to set up such a court. It has been a paradox of our century that those who murder one person are more likely to be brought to justice than those who plot genocide against millions. The International Criminal Court will put on notice the Pol Pots and Saddam Husseins of the future that they may be held to account personally for their crimes against humanity. It will also offer justice to the victims who have no means at present of bringing their suffering before any court.

I ask the House to record its appreciation of the hard work by the British team through five weeks of difficult and intensive negotiations. Britain's firm support for the principle of an International Criminal Court and the leading role that was played by our delegation in brokering consensus contributed to the successful outcome of the Rome conference.

The result is a strong court with wide powers. It will have the power to try cases of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, including crimes of sexual violence, such as the use of mass rape as an instrument of ethnic cleansing, as was practised in Bosnia. The conscription of children under 15 into military service will also be an offence liable to prosecution before the court.

The British delegation played a key part in securing a definition of war crimes that embraced internal conflicts, not only wars between states. That is of great importance, as most of the violence of the past two decades has arisen from internal, not external, conflicts.

The British team also took the initiative in proposing that the court should have power to order those who are guilty to pay reparations to their victims. That is a new power, which is not available to the tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It reflects the fact that those who abuse their power to commit crimes against others often also abuse their power to make themselves wealthy.

We consistently rejected attempts by other countries to give the court the power of the death penalty, and we were successful in maintaining a majority against any international body having the power to order the death penalty.

Much of the debate in the period running up to the Rome conference revolved around the independence of the prosecutor. I am pleased to report that the prosecutor will have the power to initiate investigations leading to prosecution on his or her own authority. States that are party to the treaty may also refer alleged crimes for investigation, but the prosecutor can take the initiative without waiting for such a referral.

From the start, our objective has been to secure maximum support for the International Criminal Court. To be credible, such a court must command substantial support in the international community. The final vote in support of the court—120 votes to seven—exceeded our expectations. The large number voting in favour was, in part, a reflection of the comprehensive international presence at the Rome conference, which was brought about by the financial support that Britain and others provided towards meeting the attendance costs of 50 of the smaller and poorer states.

To build that overwhelming support, it was necessary to meet the concerns of a number of countries that supported an International Criminal Court in principle, but had reservations about the proposed procedures. In particular, it was necessary to agree that countries signing up to the court should have the right to claim immunity from prosecution for war crimes for up to seven years.

That immunity is time limited; it does not extend to the other crimes in the court's remit, such as crimes against humanity, and it can, in any event, be overridden by a Security Council resolution. It is much more restricted than the initial bid by a number of countries that wanted an indefinite right to opt out from any of the crimes in the court's remit. I understand the regrets of those who would have preferred that no such concession were granted, but I firmly believe that it was right to make a limited compromise to secure wider support for the court and thereby achieve greater credibility for its authority.

I am sorry that, at the end of the Rome conference, the United States felt unable to support the compromise proposals. I understand its concerns about the security of its service men who are posted abroad, but we believe that those concerns are misplaced. Britain, too, has a large number of service men in posts abroad, and we and other major NATO allies are satisfied that the safeguards that are built in to the International Criminal Court will protect our service men against malicious or politically motivated prosecution.

In particular, it is a clearly established principle that the court will be able to prosecute only when there is no remedy in national law. We are confident that we can demonstrate that there is a remedy in British justice—and, for that matter, in United States justice—for accusations that are made against our service men in good faith. The screening of cases by the pre-trial chamber of the International Criminal Court will provide a safeguard against accusations that are brought in bad faith.

We shall continue, through close dialogue, to seek to bring our United States partners on board in support of this improvement to international justice, which has gained such overwhelming support from the rest of the international community.

Later this year, the world will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the universal declaration of human rights. There can be no more fitting way in which to mark that anniversary than for us to sign up to this agreement, which, for the first time, creates an international court to enforce the most fundamental of those rights. I hope that the support that the court will secure in the House will be as overwhelming as the support that it has already received in the international community.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I start by apologising for the absence of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who is currently travelling back to this country.

I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his statement. I particularly congratulate those diplomats and others who have successfully participated in the enormously complex process of establishing the permanent international court, not only in the past five weeks and in Rome, but during the ad hoc meetings and preparatory committee processes that took place under the previous Government. I also congratulate those NGOs that participated in the process, including the Red Cross, Amnesty International and the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court, which all made valuable contributions.

Those who commit the most serious crimes, which bring international revulsion, should have no place to hide, and the court represents a considerable step in the right direction. Despite the historic nature of the Foreign Secretary's announcement, many details remain matters of grave concern, on which I hope he will elaborate.

Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the fact that two of the five permanent members of the Security Council—the US and China—have not signed up to the court is a problem? Does he agree with the diplomats who have said that the court will not work effectively without US participation? Does he believe that that could weaken the court before it is even out of the starting blocks? What steps will he take to encourage countries such as India, Israel, the US and China to join us, and how will he bring those countries on board?

Although the court represents the right way forward, it will not come into being until the statute has been ratified by all the signatories. As that process could take many years, will the Foreign Secretary say when he proposes that the United Kingdom should ratify the statute and what steps he will take to encourage swift ratification by other signatories? What problems are created for the ratification process by the fact that the voting in the UN was by a non-recorded vote, in which countries did not have to identify themselves?

Will the right hon. Gentleman comment on the position of Israel, which, for many years, has understandably campaigned for the establishment of such a court, but which felt unable to sign up to the final proposals? Does he agree with the Israeli Government that the clause introduced by Egypt and Syria would make the Israeli settlements the subject of prosecutions? Is that assessment of the clause accurate?

The Foreign Secretary will acknowledge that the establishment of such a court is only half the battle. He has dealt with the position on the death penalty and the welcome inclusion of reparations, but will he outline what sanctions and punishments he envisages will be available to the court following a successful prosecution? More particularly, how will any sentence be enforced and who will pay for any subsequent imprisonment of a convicted person or persons?

We welcome the Foreign Secretary's assurances that British troops will not face malicious prosecutions of the kind feared by the US—indeed, that was one reason why the US refused to sign up to the court—but what guarantees can he give us that that will be the case? What makes him right and the US wrong?

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the court will be able to prosecute only in cases when crimes have been committed by a state that has signed the statute or when they have taken place in the territory of a signatory? Is it not the case that that leaves the door wide open to those who commit crimes in countries that have refused to accept the jurisdiction of the court?

Will the Foreign Secretary also comment on the provision that was dropped, whereby suspects who had taken refuge in a country could be extradited to face prosecution? Does that not mean that tyrants and butchers will still have access to safe havens?

We welcome the Foreign Secretary's assurances on the independence of the prosecutor, but does he agree that only judges with the highest qualifications, preferably in both criminal and international law, should be used by the court?

The court will inevitably be costly. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that he pressed for the least expensive arrangements, consistent with the court's effective functioning, and say what provisions have been made for the associated costs?

Finally, I am sure that I speak for all parts of the House when I endorse the international decision that will ensure that no man is above the law. By creating an International Criminal Court, we hope that we can move towards a more humane and peaceful world in which there is no sanctuary for the despot, the dictator or the depraved.

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Lady for her congratulations. I shall of course pass on to the officials who worked so hard to secure this agreement the congratulations from the Opposition Front Bench, which are always very gratifying.

Of course, we will continue to work with the United States in particular to get it to accede to the new institution. It is early days yet in the signing process—indeed, it has been open for signature for only one day so far. I hope that the United States will, first, come to drop its opposition and, over time, recognise that it is in its interests to be part of such an overwhelming consensus in the international community.

The hon. Lady asked whether the court could work without the United States. The answer is yes, it can work. If 120 countries want to make it work, and if those 120 include three of the permanent members of the Security Council, it can work. However, everyone recognises—I am not going to deny it—that it would work much better if the United States were a supporter of the institution.

The simplest way to resolve the question of the clause proposed by Egypt, which caused Israel to withdraw its support for the court, would be for Israel to recognise that the continuing expansion of settlements in occupied territory is without legal basis and jeopardises the peace process. I very much hope that, over the years that it will take for an International Criminal Court to be brought into being, it will be possible for us to make progress with the peace process which will resolve that difficult and outstanding issue between Israel and its neighbours.

The hon. Lady also asked about costs. I can tell her that we sought a formula that provided the best possible way to distribute the burden of the costs of the court. That is why we achieved an outcome whereby the court will be part-financed by the states that accede to it and part-financed by the United Nations, especially in respect of the cases referred through the Security Council.

Of course, the court will not be cheap. The two tribunals on Rwanda and Yugoslavia have already cost $113 million in the current year, and they are relatively

[Mr. Cook]

limited in their application. This will not be an exercise that can be achieved for a small price, but I believe that a price is worth paying to secure this important development in international justice.

Yes, we are confident that our service men will be protected against malicious prosecution. If anyone is in any doubt about whether that confidence is well placed, I should say that none of our other NATO allies took the interpretation of the United States; and, like us, many of those other NATO allies have service men in foreign posts. We are all confident that we have achieved safeguards against malicious prosecution—some of them sought by the United States itself.

The hon. Lady also raised the territorial application and jurisdiction of the court. It is indeed the case that one of the tests of whether the jurisdiction of the court would apply is whether the country that contains the territory in which the alleged crime took place consents. In practice, it is very difficult to imagine the court operating on any other basis. It is hard to see how a case could succeed without access to the scene of the crime, and the court has no powers to try people in absentia, a legal principle which most hon. Members would support. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the court could proceed against existing tyrants still in power, but there is, of course, power for the Security Council, by resolution, to refer any country or individual to the court without any consent by that country or its Government.

On the qualifications of the judges, I am pleased to report that one of the important contributions made by the British delegation was to chair the working party on those qualifications. Our team did an excellent job in achieving an outcome that requires two thirds of the bench appointed to be drawn from judges who have experience of criminal trial work. We are confident that we have made the best possible provision to make sure that the judges are experienced and of a high calibre.

I deal finally with the question of ratification. This will not be a swift or fast-track process. We are now arranging to draw up the appropriate legislation, but that legislation will be complex. It is not legislation that I would dream of asking the House to pass in a one-day sitting, as happened with the landmines treaty, because I suspect that it will contain many clauses that will give lawyers many hours of fruitful debate as it passes through the House. Therefore, it is not something which the House should imagine will be rushed through; nor will it be rushed through in many of the other countries. That is why I hope—it is our intention—that we shall be among the first 60 to ratify. If we continue to have the Opposition's support, we might be able to ratify even sooner.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that if we adopt too querulous a tone, we run the risk of underestimating the real achievement in the creation of the court? I share his satisfaction, especially in relation to the independence of the prosecutor, an issue on which I know that the British negotiating team, to which he has rightly referred in complimentary terms, pressed very hard in the final three or four days of negotiation. The team certainly deserves to be congratulated on that issue above all others.

I share the Foreign Secretary's disappointment with regard to the United States. I hope that there will not only be dialogue, but that he will impress on the United States the importance of a change of mind or, indeed, a change of heart.

On the question of immunity from prosecution for war crimes, which, as I understand it, runs for a period of up to seven years, am I right in saying that there will be no bar on investigation during that period, so that, on the expiry of such a period, any country that has taken advantage of the immunity may, in respect of war crimes, find that its citizens are liable to prosecution?

Mr. Cook: The hon. and learned Gentleman uses his privilege as a lawyer to ask me a legal question that I cannot answer. I shall take advice on whether the court would have a retrospective character in line with the seven-year time bar, and I shall happily write to him on that point.

It is fair to record that the United States has for many years been at the forefront of the international community in expressing concern about rogue states and crimes against humanity practised by evil tyrants such as Saddam Hussein. I hope that once the issue is fully considered and the text is studied in Washington, the United States will recognise that the agreement fits with its world view and is something which it should support, not oppose.

I agree absolutely that one of the main gains in Rome was the securing of the independence of the prosecutor, which was by no means a certainty before negotiations began. Our overall judgment is that, with the exception of the seven-year time limit, we secured all our negotiating objectives. As a result, we have a strong and effective court, with much greater support from the international community than we had anticipated. I therefore share the hon. and learned Gentleman's view that, although it is proper for the House to ask questions, we should not lose sight of the fact that the agreement is a great achievement which offers a major breakthrough in international justice.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): Many of my constituents will want to join in congratulating the Foreign Secretary on his achievement—not least because some of them have fled from the very regimes that we are seeking to put in the dock. Over the years, so many of us have felt that a court of that nature is vital. Perhaps he will tell the United States that those of us who are used to seeing it acting as one of the leaders on human rights and the rule of law are saddened when we see it acting as a drag anchor on the very process that we all want to encourage.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes his point with great force and great eloquence. Those of us who have met those who have fled from such evil tyrants understand two things: first, the hardship that they often have had to experience; and, secondly, the real frustration at knowing that they have no ready legal remedy. We hope that legislation for an International Criminal Court will put paid to that vacuum. I also agree with my hon. Friend that the court would be much more effective if the United States were to recognise that such a court is entirely consistent with its own policy.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement, and pay tribute

to the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd)? Although she is not in the Chamber today, she has consistently campaigned—as long as I have been an hon. Member, and undoubtedly much longer than that—for war criminals to be brought before appropriate international tribunals.

May I also ask the Foreign Secretary whether he is aware that I have tabled two written questions to him about the Nazi war criminal Aloïs Brunner—who was Eichmann's right-hand man; was responsible for many horrendous crimes against humanity, including the deportation and death of over 150,000 French jews; and is believed to be being harboured by Syria? Would he be a candidate for the attentions of the new International Criminal Court? If so, will the Government use their best endeavours to ensure that that monster is brought before the court?

Mr. Cook: There is already legal provision for those guilty of war crimes of a Nazi character during the second world war to be brought to justice. As the House well knows, Britain is at the forefront of insisting that those legal provisions should be honoured. I must be clear with the House—I do not want there to be any misunderstanding on this point—that, as a general principle, the International Criminal Court will not have a retrospective character. However, in future, it will be able to try those who commit crimes against humanity, war crimes or genocide. We hope that—by the very fact of its existence—the court will provide deterrence against such crimes, as tyrants will know not only that those whom they send out to commit such evil work may succumb to justice, but that they themselves may personally be held responsible.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): May I add my congratulations on the achievement of getting so many parties' agreement to the treaty? Did I understand the Foreign Secretary to say that the international court or prosecutor would not be able to trigger an examination of genocide, for example, in jurisdictions which have their own capacity to try war criminals? If in the 21st century there were to be another—if I may use this example—My Lai, would the state whose army committed such a massacre be able to say, "It's not a matter for you, international court or prosecutor. Our country has our own competence to deal with the matter"? Such a system would be a cop-out and ensure that there would not be adequate prosecutions, as happened in the case of My Lai.

Mr. Cook: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall tiptoe very delicately round the very undiplomatic example that he offers, but take up the issue that he raises. The principle on which the court has been created is that of complementarity—where there is effective legal remedy at a national level for the offence that is under investigation, the nation state will be expected to act on it. I think that that is an important requirement of the nations that sign up to the International Criminal Court. We should not allow signature to the court to allow nations to abdicate their own responsibility in holding their nationals to international and domestic law.

The purpose of the International Criminal Court is to provide a remedy for those states that cannot or—in the case of a collapse of law and order, such as occurred initially in Rwanda—are unable to bring their nationals to trial. Therefore, in cases in which nations cannot or—in the case of some other evil dictators—will not, the International Criminal Court provides a remedy. However, it is not a remedy which overrides the obligation of most states to execute their own legal procedures against those whom they have held to have committed a crime.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): May I echo the welcome for the agreement that has already been expressed by hon. Members and the gratitude to those who were involved in reaching an historical and very principled decision? I specifically welcome recognition of sexual violence and rape as a crime. Often, innocent children are born as a product of rape. Will the legislation contain specific provisions ensuring that there is representation for those children and for the orphans of war in any criminal proceedings that are brought? Those children are, above all, the innocent victims, and such representation would seem to be a vital part of looking to the future.

Mr. Cook: I welcome very much the support that the hon. Lady has offered both to the principle of the court and to that particular provision, which was strongly supported by Britain. I should not wish to prejudge a precise decision that may be made by the court, but I personally see no reason why—in those cases—orphans or children who are the products of sexual violence should not be legitimate candidates for reparation if that is ordered against those who are found guilty.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend is to be congratulated—particularly because of the doom and gloom of a month or two ago about whether the conference would have any successful outcome. The conference has had a considerable outcome, for which the whole world should be grateful—despite the United States's distressing decision, which will alarm and puzzle its friends, not to sign up now.

Will my right hon. Friend inform the House precisely how he foresees the timetable? He has given some indication that the process will be somewhat long and drawn-out. However, how many states will have to ratify the agreement before it comes into operation? When does he expect legislation to be before the House? On the basis of his earlier comments, it seems likely that that will happen not in the next Session but probably in the Session after that. Is that correct? What does he think is the optimum date for establishment of the court?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is quite right to contrast the very successful outcome of the Rome conference with what he described as the "doom and gloom" of expectations for the conference. There was doom and gloom about the outcome not only a few weeks ago but up until about last Thursday. The achievement is quite remarkable tribute to the way in which the conference was handled in its closing hours and to the determination of many national delegations, including the British one, that it would be a success.

[Mr. Cook]

The answer to my hon. Friend's question about how many countries need to ratify for the court to come into force is 60. It will take some time to get there—I do not wish to mislead the House on that point—but Britain will seek to ratify as quickly as we reasonably can. That will require, first, drawing up complex legislation, and, secondly, providing adequate time in the House for the legislation to be considered. Whether we can do that in the immediate future is something to which all hon. Members can apply their mind and come to their own conclusion. However, I can give the House an assurance that we will do it as quickly as we can. I personally would expect Britain to be among the first 60 to bring the court into being.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The principle of the court is welcomed by both sides of the House—the right hon. Gentleman has already pointed out that the court's purpose is not only to punish but to deter. However, he said that the court may have to apply to the Security Council in dealing with countries that are not signatories to the agreement. Will such decisions have to be unanimous or majority ones? If they have to be unanimous, does he think that that requirement will impede the court's practical work in deterring the Pol Pots and Saddam Husseins of this world?

Mr. Cook: I think that the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that it will be by a majority, subject, of course, to the fact that there are five countries—of which we are one—that have a veto over any resolution. In practice, there has not been a problem in the Security Council in getting international agreement to establish special tribunals to consider war crimes in Rwanda and in former Yugoslavia.

Until now, we have lacked the mechanism by which to act on those resolutions, which is why, on each occasion, we have had to invent an entirely new tribunal with its own procedures and institutions. Now, we will have the advantage that the International Criminal Court will be ready to act on any war crimes referred to it by the Security Council.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on his imagination in organising payment of travel expenses for some 50 of the poorest countries of the world? As a matter of curiosity, how much did we pay for that significant gesture? May I ask him about two further matters? First, will he reflect on whether the International Criminal Court would help in a case that has been raised with me by the Davidson family of Linlithgow—that of their cousin George Atkinson whose problems in Dubai have been outlined in four pages of this week's colour supplement of *The Sunday Times*? I use the case as an example of one in which an International Criminal Court could help.

Secondly, tomorrow night I have the good fortune to have the 15th Adjournment debate on Lockerbie. Perhaps my right hon. Friend could ask the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), who is sitting next to him, to explain whether the International Criminal Court could help us out of the impasse on Pan Am flight 103 tomorrow night.

Mr. Cook: The answer to my hon. Friend's first question is that Britain contributed $100,000 to the UN trust fund set up for that purpose. I can tell the House that Britain was one of the biggest donors to that trust fund.

As my hon. Friend knows, I am familiar with the Atkinson case. I have been visited by his constituent who discussed it with me. We continue to be in close contact and to provide consular assistance and guidance. However, I am not clear whether anything in the Atkinson case would lend itself to an action before the International Criminal Court.

My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that I am aware that he has an Adjournment debate on Lockerbie tomorrow night. I hope that he will accept that it is a matter that is also of high priority within the Foreign Office. Apart from the retrospective element, the case of Lockerbie is unlikely to come within the scope of the court because we have firmly taken the view that the International Criminal Court should not cut across crimes for which there is already adequate international treaty provision, and there is very satisfactory provision in treaty for action against terrorism. Unfortunately, in the particular case of Lockerbie, it is not possible to enforce those mechanisms because Libya flatly refuses to extradite the two people who ought to be brought to trial.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): May I whole-heartedly congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his statement? May I press him a little further on the seven-year immunity? What triggers that time period? Is it the date of the crime or the date of the intention to prosecute? Which state claims the immunity? Is it the state in which the crime was committed, or the state whose nationals are accused of committing the crime?

Mr. Cook: My understanding is that the seven-year limit starts running from the point of accession to the International Criminal Court—in other words, when 60 countries have ratified it, any one of them could claim a seven-year period of exemption from any war crime, not a specific war crime. Of course, the exemption would lapse at the end of seven years, and the country concerned would fall fully within the scope of the court. It will be an exemption from prosecution in respect of its own nationals, wherever they might be; hence the concern of one other NATO ally—not the United States—to protect its service men by that provision. It is tightly drawn and limited. I shall not pretend to the House that we put forward that concession or that we would have wished to see it as part of a negotiating position, but it does not strike at the heart of the court and was well worth agreeing to in order to get aboard a number of countries that would not otherwise have supported it.

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): I know that the Council of Europe made representations to the negotiating body that war crimes against women and children should be given particular recognition. That was done because of the evidence that came to light

after the break-up of Yugoslavia. My right hon. Friend has already said that rape will now come under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Can he also confirm that women and children forced into prostitution and trafficked for that purpose will also come under the jurisdiction of the ICC?

Mr. Cook: I am very happy to say to my hon. Friend that enslavement is one of the crimes against humanity that come explicitly under the remit of the International Criminal Court, so enforced prostitution of the kind to which my hon. Friend refers will be prosecutable before the International Criminal Court as a war crime or a crime against humanity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Thank you very much.

Orders of the Day

Northern Ireland Bill

Order for Second Reading read.—[Queen's consent, on behalf of the Crown, signified.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the Secretary of State, I must inform the House that Madam Speaker has decided to impose a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill has one simple overriding purpose—to implement the Belfast agreement. The agreement was negotiated by the Northern Ireland parties and agreed on Good Friday. It was supported by more than 71 per cent. of voters in Northern Ireland in the referendum on 22 May. The Bill represents the triple lock—people, parties and now Parliament.

Despite all the achievements of recent months, years of division in Northern Ireland cannot be overcome at a stroke. We have been reminded of the human cost of such divisions in recent weeks. The dispute over the parade at Drumcree and the violence that surrounded it has left a dark, sad cloud hanging over Northern Ireland. The funerals of the three boys—Mark, Richard and Jason—and the anguish of their family are terrible reminders of the hatred and division that lurk not far away from all the hope and expectation that we have for the future. We have recently been reminded of that by yet another appalling murder—that of Andrew Kearney—but the Good Friday agreement showed that, despite divisions, the parties and people of Northern Ireland can agree and can find an accommodation between their different views and beliefs and begin to chart a non-violent route into the future.

The Bill is all about implementing the agreement in full. We have had to fill in a number of practical gaps that were left by the agreement. In doing that, we have had the benefit of consultations with all the Northern Ireland parties. It is crucial that the momentum of the talks, the agreement, the referendum, the elections is maintained.

The agreement sets a tough timetable. The Bill has been prepared in record time, and I should like to express my appreciation to the civil servants who have worked so hard and to both Houses for facilitating the programme for the Bill when there are so many other important matters to be addressed.

There will, no doubt, need to be Government amendments to the Bill, mainly as a result of the urgency with which it has been prepared. As with previous legislation under the agreement, we will be flexible and sympathetic to other amendments intended to improve the way in which the Bill reflects what is in the agreement. However, I repeat what I have said in the House before; we cannot rewrite the agreement.

The agreement and the Bill look forward to a new future for Northern Ireland where all relationships are based on consent and mutual respect; where the people of Northern Ireland and their leaders take responsibility for their own government and their future; where government

[Marjorie Mowlam]

is an exercise not in dor; nation, but in partnership; where all parts of the community work together to solve problems that affect everyone and where all the people—north and south on the island of Ireland and, indeed, among all these islands—can work together for the mutual benefit of all.

The Bill implements the agreement. It is a substantial piece of legislation, and I should like to highlight some of its main features. The first two clauses rightly put the principle of consent at the forefront of the Bill. Whether Northern Ireland is to remain part of the United Kingdom or become part of a united Ireland is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide. The key principle of consent is enshrined in the Bill and has been endorsed overwhelmingly by the people of Northern Ireland and of the Republic.

Clause 3 provides for devolution once

"sufficient progress has been made in implementing the Belfast Agreement".

That is a judgment for the Secretary of State. In making it, I shall consider whether the Assembly, in its shadow phase, has made the necessary preparations; that all the necessary Ministers have been selected; that the north-south ministerial council and the British-Irish Council have met in shadow form; and that the initial six cross-border implementation bodies have been identified so that they can function from the day the powers are transferred.

The Assembly has already made a start. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have been elected and have been tasked by the Assembly to come forward over the summer with proposals on much of the preparatory work. Our aim is to achieve the transfer of powers early in 1999. Clause 4 deals with subject matters that may be devolved to the Assembly. Excepted matters, in schedule 2, cannot be devolved. They concern, for example, the Crown, foreign affairs, defence and national security. Reserved matters in schedule 3 will initially remain the responsibility of the UK Government, but can be devolved in future by Order in Council if the Assembly so wishes.

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): My right hon. Friend has come to the question of reserved powers. Could any of the Bill's provisions affect the right of this House to impose the provisions of the Abortion Act 1967 on Northern Ireland, to ask questions about abortion in Northern Ireland or to debate abortion in relation to Northern Ireland?

Marjorie Mowlam: The question of abortion will be a reserved power and therefore remains part of provisions with which the House will continue to deal. We are considering talking to groups about the issue, about which many in the House feel strongly. As my hon. Friend knows, no party in Northern Ireland would support the 1967 Act. At this time of transition, however, there may be a case for clarifying inconsistencies in the legal and medical positions. Due to the universal view that the Act should not apply in Northern Ireland, with which I disagree, we would need careful consultation with the parties.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): As I understand it, the legislation does not apply or belong to Northern Ireland; it is not on the Northern Ireland statute book. As such powers will partly be transferred to the Department of Health and Social Services in Northern Ireland, they will become the responsibility of Northern Ireland. It would be very wrong if, in the transfer of powers, anyone in this House removed the right of Northern Ireland people to make their own decision on the matter.

Marjorie Mowlam: I hear what my hon. Friend says. From my preparation for the debate, I understand that the power is potentially a reserved one, even though—he is absolutely right—the 1967 Act does not apply. Given that it is a reserved power, the House will still have an opportunity to debate the matter. I was making clear the position of political parties in Northern Ireland.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I was under the impression that the matter would be transferred; it comes under the powers to be transferred to Northern Ireland Departments. Is the right hon. Lady saying that there will be exceptions to the transfer of powers that were transferred under previous legislation to a previous assembly? Is she saying that the House will retain this once transferred power?

Marjorie Mowlam: I see many hon. Members nodding. Normally, the subject would be considered a health issue. From my preparation, I understand that the matter concerns a right; it is a reserved matter. I shall correct myself later if I am wrong and the power is to be transferred. A note from my experts says that the matter is reserved because it is part of criminal law and therefore must remain reserved. I see the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) nodding; I was correct, thank goodness.

Other reserved matters include those concerning criminal justice, policing and prisons. The outcome of the two reviews into policing and criminal justice will obviously be an important part of any future transfer of reserved powers. Everything else is a transferred matter. That means that the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Department will be transferred to the new Northern Ireland Ministers.

Clause 4(5) defines "cross-community support" as it is defined in the agreement. Where key interests of either community are at stake, a requirement for cross-community support ensures that the Assembly will operate by partnership between the two main parts of the community.

Part II provides for the Assembly to make laws for Northern Ireland. Clause 6 borrows from the Scotland Bill, placing limits on the Assembly's legislative competence. The courts ultimately the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council are to rule on whether the Assembly has stepped outside its legislative competence.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Many of us have received a letter from Joan Smyth, the chair and chief executive of the Equal Opportunities Commission, in which she claims

"The proposal for the statutory obligations does not meet the commitments made in Paragraph 3 of the Agreement".

and that that will not lead to effective sexual equality. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her earlier offer to look sympathetically at amendments that seek to strengthen the Bill, and draw to her attention the EOC's claim.

Marjorie Mowlam: Schedules 8 and 9 refer specifically to the matter. I am well aware of the concern that the EOC has expressed about the Equality Commission. The EOC outlined two or three specific problems. I hope that, when we consider schedules 8 and 9, my hon. Friend will see that we have taken those problems into account. The EOC was concerned about the hierarchy of rights and that, of the seven or eight inequalities listed, gender, race and disability would be too far down the agenda. We have answered concerns about functions and finance in the schedules. We have said that the Equality Commission would be structured by the chief executives of the four existing relevant commissions and by four representatives from the fields of inequality, sexual orientation, age and dependency. As I said, we are very flexible on amendments. We are listening to what people are saying and I believe that the specific criticism in the letter is addressed in the schedules.

Part III provides for the new executive authorities in Northern Ireland to be drawn from the Assembly. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) on their election as First Minister and Deputy First Minister designate. It is expected that, in September, on the back of their proposals on the number and allocation of portfolios, the other Northern Ireland Ministers will be selected using the d'Hondt procedure that is set out in clause 15.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Clause 14 says that if either the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister resigns or vacates office, the other office is also deemed void. I do not wish such a situation on anybody, but there must be provision for an interregnum in the case of a bereavement or a resignation outside the political arena. Hours can be critical in Northern Ireland. We must make provision for continuity of office.

Marjorie Mowlam: The Standing Orders being drawn up will address that. The Bill provides for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to work in unison when possible, because that is the spirit of the Good Friday agreement, but we do not expect them both to fall under a bus. We are well aware of how clause 14 could be interpreted, so we are considering that in the Standing Orders.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Secretary of State used the phrase "in unison". Why do we need constant use of the word jointly in the Bill? Does that not tie issues too tightly? What would happen in Scotland if the Labour party and the Scottish National party were tied together and had to work jointly? It is a recipe for disaster.

Marjorie Mowlam: I use the word in the spirit of the Good Friday agreement, which is for parties of both communities to work together by consent when possible. If there are inconsistencies with the Good Friday agreement, we shall look at them. The comparison with Scotland does not hold completely, because there are differences in structures between Scottish devolution and what is being proposed for Northern Ireland. For example, there is to be a Cabinet Government in Scotland.

Clause 16 permits the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make up the Executive Committee for the Assembly. Before each Minister takes up office, he or she must take the pledge of office, which is reproduced in full in schedule 5 and in the agreement. It includes a

"commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means",

a pledge

"to discharge in good faith all the duties of office"

and an undertaking

"to support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly".

Clause 22 provides for each Northern Ireland Minister to be advised and assisted by a Committee of the Assembly, as the agreement says. It is fundamental to the Belfast agreement that the opportunities for a new future rest on people using only non-violent and democratic means to achieve their political objectives.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): The Secretary of State made a passing reference at the start of her speech to the murder yesterday, in tragic circumstances, of Mr. Andrew Kearney. She may also be aware of the IRA beating of Mr. Vincent McKenna on the Ormeau road, who identified three of his attackers as senior members of the IRA. She will be aware that the family of Mr. Andrew Kearney have said that they believe that the IRA murdered him. In view of that evidence of breaches of the IRA ceasefire, is the Secretary of State convinced that the provisions of the Bill are adequate to ensure that organisations with political representatives in the Assembly can be held to account for their on-going violence on the streets and that such people can and will be excluded from holding ministerial office?

Marjorie Mowlam: I am convinced that the Bill is adequate. The Assembly will make the final decision. The hon. Gentleman refers to evidence in relation to the appalling murder of Mr. Kearney. I have yet to see evidence. As I have made clear on many occasions, when we get evidence, we shall make a judgment, as is our duty, and make recommendations to the Assembly on the basis of that.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Will the Secretary of State confirm that she still believes that provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA are inextricably linked?

Marjorie Mowlam: Every time I have been asked that, I have said that I believe that to be the case. I shall make a judgment in the round based on the four factors that the Prime Minister outlined: a commitment to non-violence; the use of peaceful means only; no use of proxy groups; and no use of violent methods of any kind. I shall make a recommendation to the Assembly on that basis. The decision to act will rest with the Assembly.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down) *rose*

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall have to stop soon, otherwise no one else will get a chance to speak.

Mr. McCartney: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. Unless the whole gamut of a detailed

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court procedure is followed, it seems probable that all the Secretary of State's assessments of evidence will be political decisions rather than decisions based on hard evidence. I note the speed with which the Government ascribe to the Orange Order, of which I am not a member, complicity in the murders in Ballymoney, but their reluctance to make similar condemnation of IRA murders.

Marjorie Mowlam: As I have said many times before, I shall look at the evidence and make a judgment, as the Good Friday agreement provides. I have never said that the Orangemen were to blame for the violence in Drumcree. I said in the House just a week ago that I was deeply concerned that they were being used by people who did not support the agreement, but who were intent on destroying it. The television pictures showed a line of Orangemen, behind whom were other people, among whom there was shooting and blast bombs. Those other people made a big difference to what was going on. I did not directly blame many of the Orangemen who, as I have said many times, were badly served by others who came out to support them.

Rev. Martin Smyth *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: This must be the last time I give way.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I appreciate the Secretary of State's giving way, because I realise that she wants to move on. There has been an admission in *The Irish Times* by the Continuity Army Council that it was responsible for incendiary devices that destroyed a property in north Belfast, leaving 40 people unemployed. The Chief Constable's certificate has not been issued on the grounds that there is not enough evidence. What constitutes evidence, given that *The Irish Times* has the code word from the Continuity Army Council?

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall look at all the evidence that comes to me from security sources and the RUC. I shall make a judgment based on the four criteria. I cannot make a judgment based on reports in *The Irish Times* or any other newspaper. I shall deal with the facts because, as we all know, newspapers sometimes write a story that we do not think is a fair representation. I shall stick to the facts as they come to me.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East) *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: I am sorry. I have been reasonable in giving way.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said that the use of the twin tactics of the ballot box and the Armalite is unacceptable. He said:

"There can be no fudge between democracy and terror."

The agreement states that clearly. Paragraph 25 of strand 1 says:

"An individual may be removed from office following a decision of the Assembly taken on a cross-community basis, if (s)he loses the confidence of the Assembly, voting on a cross-community basis, for failure to meet his or her responsibilities including, inter alia, those set out in the Pledge of Office. Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means, and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office under these provisions."

Clause 23 gives effect to those arrangements.

Mr. Robinson: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: No, I want to make progress. I do apologise.

Decisions on exclusion from ministerial office lie with the Assembly. That is what the agreement says. Ministers are chosen to serve the Assembly. The agreement says that a Minister can be removed from office for any failure to meet his or her responsibilities, including failure to co-operate properly with the institutions being set up by the agreement.

Clause 23(6) allows me to inform the Assembly if I think it should consider whether an individual or party is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means and so should be excluded. We will use the four Balmoral criteria to make the assessment—the criteria appear in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, which we debated in the House a couple of weeks ago.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that if the arrangements prove ineffective during the first six months of the life of the shadow Assembly or the full Assembly, we will support changes to make them more effective.

Part IV of the Bill is concerned with the elections and procedures of the Assembly.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall, but I must then give way to the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). That will be the last time I give way.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), gave an undertaking to the Standing Committee on the Northern Ireland (Elections) Bill that this Bill would deal with arrangements for filling casual vacancies for the Assembly. Some of us had tabled amendments to avert the need for by-elections. However, clause 27 of this Bill contains exactly the same procedure as was in the Northern Ireland (Elections) Bill; the matter is left up in the air. It is not unreasonable to think that Ministers should have come here with specific proposals on filling casual vacancies. That has not been done.

Marjorie Mowlam: We have included in the Bill a number of amendments suggested by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and we are considering others. I said that we would table other amendments later. I hope that my hon. Friend will have a little patience on that matter.

Mr. Peter Robinson: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for eventually giving way to me. Can she show us where in the Bill it states that anybody can be excluded from taking up office because they have not given their

commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means? The Bill shows how they can be removed from office. Can they be stopped from taking up office?

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes. Clause 23 contains the exclusion from office provisions, which include a person who has not signed up to peaceful and democratic ways forward. If a person is part of the Assembly, he or she will be part of a party that has signed up to peaceful, non-violent ways forward. If he or she moves into office, but does not fulfil the pledge of office, he or she will—if the Assembly so chooses—be excluded. If that commitment is not given, they cannot take up office, as in clause 23(1).

Part IV is concerned with the elections and procedure of the Assembly. The Assembly is to have a four-year term, with the next election coming in May 2003.

Clause 34 provides for "petitions of concern", as in the agreement. If 30 Members of the Assembly request it, any vote in the Assembly can be required to have cross-community support, so either community can ensure that, in the future, its fundamental interests are protected. The key decisions of the Assembly will be taken on a partnership basis.

Part V makes financial provision. The intention is that the transferred matters in Northern Ireland should continue to be funded on the basis of the Barnett formula. Within that, in future, the Northern Ireland Administration will have the freedom to determine its own expenditure priorities.

Part VI provides further protection for human rights and equality of opportunity—again, reflecting the provisions in the agreement. The new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will be a more powerful and wide-ranging body than the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, which it replaces. The new commission will be independent of government. It has a wide remit

"to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness in Northern Ireland of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights".

The commission will automatically receive every Bill introduced into the Assembly, so that it can, if it wishes, scrutinise it for compatibility with human rights. The commission will provide advice both to me and to Ministers in the Assembly, both at our request and at its own initiative. In particular, one of its first tasks will be to look at the scope for defining rights over and above those in the European convention on human rights to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. Such rights could constitute a future Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Under clause 56, the commission has the power to assist individuals in proceedings in the courts where issues of human rights arise.

Clause 59 establishes the Equality Commission. On 10 July, I announced the outcome of the Government's consultation on the proposals. Following that consultation, we have—as I stated earlier—sought to protect the importance of gender, race and disability within a single commission.

Clause 61 places a statutory duty on the public sector to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in all areas of its operations.

Clause 65 provides for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make preparations for the establishment of the civic forum. Those will then need to be approved by the Assembly.

Finally, clauses 66 and 67 deal with the roles of Northern Ireland Ministers at meetings of the various bodies under strands 2 and 3 of the Belfast agreement. That wider framework of relationships is fundamental to the success of the Assembly and of the agreement as a whole. All are mutually interdependent. None can successfully function without the others.

Clause 68 reflects paragraph 9 of strand 2 of the agreement. By 31st October, the shadow north-south ministerial council is to agree six areas where future north-south co-operation will take place through agreed implementation bodies on a cross-border or all-Ireland basis. Once agreed, I can confer powers and functions on such bodies under clause 68. That will enable me to meet the commitment in paragraph 10 of strand 2 to make the necessary preparations to ensure that these bodies function at the time of the transfer of powers.

The Bill makes a further important step in implementing the Belfast agreement. Since the agreement was reached on Good Friday, it has been endorsed by a referendum on 22 May; elections were held on 25 June for the Assembly; the Assembly had its first meeting on 1 July and elected the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; the Policing Commission has begun its work; the review of criminal justice is under way; the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill is under consideration in Parliament; and decommissioning schemes have been introduced.

The Bill paves the way for the transfer of powers to locally elected politicians from early next year. It is essential that all aspects of the agreement move forward together in parallel and that all parties honour the commitments they have made. Unless they do that, the agreement will not work.

On 10 April, thanks to the courage and determination of the Northern Ireland talks parties, the people of Northern Ireland began an historic journey towards a new future. The Bill is another crucial milestone along the way. It is Parliament's opportunity to show solidarity and support for the people of Northern Ireland and to take forward their democratic wish.

As such, I commend the Bill to the House.

5.48 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): First, I thank the Secretary of State for allowing us to see an early draft of the Bill and allowing us to comment on it—an opportunity which, I gather, was given to every party in the House. Secondly, I thank her and her parliamentary colleagues for allowing the House to table amendments to the Bill at an earlier stage than would usually be the case. That will give the House a greater opportunity to consider amendments carefully before the Committee stage, which starts on Wednesday. I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for setting out the main provisions of the Bill—a Bill which, I believe, is warmly welcomed throughout Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

On behalf of the Opposition, I offer sincere congratulations to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) on their election as First Minister and Deputy First Minister designate in the Assembly. They both played a crucial role in negotiating the Belfast agreement. Both showed steely determination to make progress when it might have been an easier and safer

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option to take refuge in some of the slogans and entrenched positions of the past. The relationship between them will, in many respects, be the axis that binds together the Executive, and with it many of the hopes and aspirations for the future.

No one underestimates the difficulties and challenges that lie ahead, not least the formation of a Northern Ireland Executive. I believe, however, that we can all take encouragement from the statesmanlike way in which the First Minister and his deputy have worked together to defuse the situation at Drumcree in recent days, and to ensure that it has not escalated out of control. That augurs well for the future. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing the two of them well in the trying times ahead.

The Bill gives legislative effect to those parts of the Belfast agreement that establish the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive Committee. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider that, ever since the demise of Stormont in 1972 and the power-sharing Executive in 1974, it has been the objective of all Governments to end direct rule and to re-establish devolved institutions of government on a basis that can command widespread support throughout the community. To say that it has proved extremely difficult to achieve is something of an understatement.

Following one of the golden rules of politics, legislation that was originally intended to be temporary—the Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974—has assumed an air of permanence. Every year since 1974, successive Secretaries of State have come to the House to renew the Act, and to express the hope that it will be the last time that they must do so.

High-profile initiatives have come and gone—the constitutional convention in 1975, the Atkins round table talks in 1980 and Lord Prior's "rolling devolution" assembly from 1982 to 1986. Finally, the painstaking efforts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), continued by Lord Mayhew, paved the way for the successes that have so far been achieved and the Bill that we are discussing today.

However, we should not underestimate the achievements of direct rule. It is, as I know the Secretary of State will acknowledge, a fair, efficient and effective method of government. Under successive Secretaries of State, progress has been made on several fronts. However, few people have ever regarded it as anything but second best as a form of government: however wisely the current Secretary of State and her predecessors have administered the Province, direct rule has suffered from a number of crucial defects.

Under direct rule, the Secretary of State and her colleagues administer the six separate Northern Ireland Departments. Legislation on "transferred" matters is often made by Order in Council rather than by Bill; I believe that the previous Government made some progress in that area. No Minister who has served in the Northern Ireland Office since 1972 has ever sat for a Northern Ireland constituency. The Secretary of State and her colleagues exercise a range of powers which, anywhere else in the United Kingdom, would be exercised at local level. That has created in Northern Ireland a democratic deficit, in which Northern Ireland's elected representatives have been unable to decide the priorities for Northern Ireland and to be answerable to the electorate there.

That, in turn, has fostered in Northern Ireland an engrained culture of political opposition. Despite the establishment of a Select Committee of the House—I pay tribute to the work that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has done—that cannot be a substitute for the proper scrutiny of legislation that will be provided by the Assembly; nor can the work of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee.

The biggest challenges that lie ahead—I say this constructively—will be for Northern Ireland's politicians to break free from the culture of opposition and to be responsible for shaping policies on such matters as health, education, industrial development and, of course, the environment.

The Bill will finally bring to an end the anomaly of direct rule. That will be good for the administration of Northern Ireland, for the political life of Northern Ireland and for democracy. The Assembly will also serve a wider political purpose. It will bring politicians from the two traditions together, uniting—we hope—to work for the good of Northern Ireland and its people. Nothing will better demonstrate the determination of Ulster's political representatives to make a reality of the new beginning than the relationship that the Belfast agreement represents.

Let us be clear in our minds that the new Assembly is not a return to the Stormont period. It is not a return to the era of political institutions being operated by, and having the allegiance of, only one section of the community; and it is not an instrument for the dominance of one community over another. One of the great virtues of the Assembly—and a source of real hope—is that, unlike its predecessors, it should be able to command the allegiance and support of all the major traditions in Northern Ireland—Unionists, nationalists and those who do not wish to be classified by such labels.

The Assembly will give to those parties that have clearly and unequivocally renounced violence—and by their words and deeds proved that to be the case—the share in the government and administration of the Province that their political mandate warrants. There will be important safeguards for the passage of legislation; minimum thresholds of support by the Unionist and nationalist blocs will be required. The Bill also contains significant protection for minorities and human rights. All that should be welcomed throughout Northern Ireland.

However, the Assembly will work firmly—and I believe securely—within the United Kingdom. It is not an Assembly which undermines the Union.

The retention of the office of Secretary of State is especially important, providing a vital link between Northern Ireland and Westminster, and exercising significant powers in relation to the Assembly and control over excepted matters. We are also adamant that the House should continue to take a close interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland. We should not repeat the mistakes of the Stormont period, when the House effectively turned its back on Stormont and the Province. There must be in Northern Ireland, as much as in Scotland and Wales, the strongest possible relationship between Westminster and the devolved institutions.

Northern Ireland will continue to be represented in this Parliament. Clause 5(6) of the Bill—reflecting paragraph 34 of the agreement—makes it clear that the establishment of the Assembly

"does not affect the power of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to make laws for Northern Ireland."

The Bill repeals the Government of Ireland Act 1920. We have no problem with that. Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom is guaranteed by the Act of Union of 1800, which is unaffected by anything in the agreement or in the Bill. It is now more firmly established than ever before that there will be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the people who live there.

For the first time since the tripartite agreement signed by Baldwin, Craig and Cosgrave in 1925, the Irish Government will recognise Northern Ireland as a legitimate political entity and a legitimate part of the United Kingdom. In recognition of that unassailable fact, the Irish territorial claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland has been amended.

Against that background, we can be comfortable with the arrangements for the north-south ministerial council, service on which will be a statutory requirement for any Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive. The agreement identifies a number of sensible areas of competence for the north-south body where co-operation could bring benefits to both parts of the island.

None of that undermines the sovereignty of the United Kingdom or implies some kind of slippery slope towards a united Ireland. There are clear lines of accountability back to the Assembly. On this subject, I can do no better than to quote the words of the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland—a figure revered to this day by many Unionists—James Craig, when he said:

"the North and South have got to live together as neighbours and the prosperity of Northern Ireland does undoubtedly affect the prosperity of the South of Ireland.

So it is for the Government of the South and the Government of the North, to turn their hands rather from the matters which may have divided them in the past, to concentrate on the matters which really affect the welfare of the people in their own area with a view that the whole of Ireland, and not one part of it, may be prosperous."

Those words were spoken in 1926—significantly, just after the tripartite agreement had recognised the border between north and south. Later events, as we know, ensured that the co-operation envisaged by Craig sadly did not occur. However, I believe that the new political dispensation, the Belfast agreement and the changes that have been made in the Republic, allow us to fulfil Craig's vision and to embark on a new period of constructive co-operation between north and south.

Mr. Robert McCartney: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that the tripartite agreement of 1925 was effectively rejected by the 1937 constitution of the Republic of Ireland, and all the wise things that Craigavon said were abandoned? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that what he said was inaccurate?

Mr. MacKay: The hon. and learned Gentleman was not listening to what I said.

Mr. McCartney: I was—very carefully.

Mr. MacKay: I said clearly that, regrettably, events led to that not happening. I also said clearly that the constitution of the Republic of Ireland has been changed to take into account the fact that the Republic no longer has a constitutional claim on the north. The hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) cannot ignore that, much as he may wish to do so, politically.

I shall return to my speech, as I know that many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House want to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We welcome the establishment of the British-Irish council, an idea that owes its origins in no small part to the work of my late colleague, Sir John Biggs-Davison.

For all those reasons, the Opposition support the Bill, and if necessary will support it in the Division Lobby this evening. We do not believe, however, that it is perfect in every respect. There are genuine concerns on two particular issues—the release of prisoners, and the entry into the government of Northern Ireland of the political representatives of those organisations that have yet to establish a commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful methods.

We agree with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State that there can be no compromise between democracy and terrorism. Furthermore, there can be no question of any organisation wielding—if I may paraphrase Danny Morrison's famous remark—Executive power in one hand and an Armalite in the other. In that context, we strongly support the fact that all Ministers will have to make a pledge of office setting out their opposition to violence, and to comply with the ministerial code of conduct.

We also support the provisions of the legislation that require Members of the Assembly serving as shadow Ministers during the transitional period to affirm their commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means, and their opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose. We trust that any party breaching those requirements during the transitional period will not serve in the Executive once powers have been devolved to it. However, we continue to find it disturbing that there is no guarantee that Assembly Members will be barred from office unless the organisations with which they are associated are co-operating fully with the decommissioning commission.

The Opposition are not seeking to rewrite the agreement. It was the Prime Minister who saw fit to clarify the Belfast agreement and in so doing to offer a particular interpretation of it, and it was on his interpretation that many of the people of Northern Ireland voted yes in the referendum in May. We ask the Government to make it clear in the legislation that full co-operation with the decommissioning commission will be a condition of entry into any ministerial position in the Assembly. That is what the people believed was the Government's position at the time of the referendum. They should have the reassurance that it remains the Government's position today.

I conclude by speaking as a Unionist to fellow Unionists in Northern Ireland. The Belfast agreement has been described in some circles as "Sunningdale for slow learners." I do not necessarily agree with that interpretation, but it serves to remind us of the high hopes that many people entertained in 1974. What was then described as a new beginning was brought crashing down in only five months. There are some Unionists today who want to wreck the agreement. In my view, few acts would

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do more to weaken the Unionist case and undermine the achievements of recent years, especially the almost universal acceptance now of the principle of consent. Few acts would more readily play into the hands of the Unionists' enemies.

To the nationalists I say this: do not reinforce the suspicions of those who would portray the agreement as a Trojan horse to Irish unity by setting impossible demands and setting ambitions for the north-south ministerial council too high.

Finally, on a cautionary note and wishing the Assembly well, let us for once in Northern Ireland learn some of the lessons of history, in order that we are not condemned to repeat its mistakes.

6.5 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I welcome the Bill, primarily because it provides for the transfer of power to the New Northern Ireland Assembly and ends 26 years of direct rule—26 wasted years, 26 years of bad government and a constant rundown in the quality of the Northern Ireland civil service. It gives to the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland the opportunity to turn that back and to put in place better government—government closer to the people and more responsive to their needs. Naturally, we hope that it will succeed.

We hope that the provisions of the Bill will be accompanied by an end to violence, but the present situation gives much cause for concern. We see the attempts at continued violence, mainly from dissident republicans. That is shown in the attempted wave of bombing in London, which was intercepted by the police only a few days ago, for which we are thankful, and shown also in the attempted bombing in Northern Ireland.

A little-remarked feature of the past couple of weeks has been the interception by the police of a 1,400 lb car bomb in Armagh and the defusing of a 500 lb car bomb in Newry. We congratulate the security forces in Northern Ireland and in London and hope that they will continue to succeed, but the frequency with which bombs are coming in from real IRA, continuity IRA, dissident IRA—it does not matter which—is a matter for concern. More effective action is needed on that front.

There is also concern about the actions of some loyalist rejectionists. I shall make a few observations with regard to recent events in Northern Ireland, especially those at Drumcree. If the Garvaghy road residents really supported the agreement with its emphasis on the rights of people to celebrate their identity, they would have withdrawn their objections to Orangemen walking home from church along that road.

If the Parades Commission really supported the new beginning offered by the agreement, it would not have interfered with the right of assembly or freedom of movement. Most Portadown Orangemen were peacefully protesting within the law against what they saw as an injustice, and they have my sympathy, but too many people were exploiting that protest in the attempt to destroy the hopes contained in the agreement and to see violence resumed. They were wrong and they have failed. It is clear that by far the greater number of people in Northern Ireland reject their methods and their objectives. We must recognise that a legitimate sense of grievance remains and must be addressed.

The Assembly is based on the principle of proportionality carried into effect by the d'Hondt formula. While the d'Hondt formula is automatic, there is a condition on its application that is contained in paragraph 25 of the strand 1 section of the agreement and is carried into effect in the Bill by clause 23, which has been referred to already in the debate. That condition involves the commitment to peaceful means and the democratic process. I refer particularly to clause 23(2), which states:

"If the Assembly resolves that a political party does not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly . . . because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means . . . members of that party shall be excluded".

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that the clause contains the phrase "does not enjoy", so the provision can be exercised ab initio to exclude people from office and not merely remove them once they have entered office.

As things stand, I have no confidence in Sinn Fein's commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means. Consequently, I would have to act in accordance with clause 23(2) if such a situation were to arise today. Will things change in the future? Essentially, that is in the hands of Sinn Fein. It knows what it must do in order for things to change—we spelled that out in detail in our manifesto for the Assembly elections. It is up to Sinn Fein. So far, it has done nothing positive: it has not even fulfilled the expectations that it created in the media a few weeks ago regarding the disappeared. On the other hand, we have Sinn Fein's negative acts, evidenced by its attempts to exploit tensions over the marches and by beatings. The McKenna attack and the Kearney killing have been mentioned. I believe that the evidence of Mr. McKenna that he recognised and identified some of his assailants is evidence on which the Secretary of State can rely.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's giving way on that point. As the representative of that constituency, I must put on record the fact that Vincent McKenna is an honourable man with republican views. He began to be disgusted by what was occurring in the community and discovered that the bulk of the community would be happy with an Orange procession along the Ormeau road. He was immediately threatened by the IRA, which has now acted.

Mr. Trimble: My hon. Friend makes his point very effectively.

If the Assembly is to work, it must be based on an effective coalition between us and the SDLP. I have no problem with that concept—indeed, I supported it in the constitutional convention of 1975. At that time, the coalition was to be entered into freely; this time, the coalition is formalised in the agreement and in legislation—particularly with regard to the special voting procedures contained therein.

In principle, those procedures—weighted majorities and special votes with some people identified as nationalist and others as Unionist—are uncomfortable, some would say objectionable, because they enshrine sectarianism in the operations of the Assembly. I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, sufficient confidence will be generated in the Assembly to enable us to move away from those procedures. In any event, there may be a growth in parties that decline to be classified as either nationalist or Unionist. For those reasons, it would have

been better if those procedures had been presented in a form that could be amended easily rather than being set in stone. We are uncomfortable with their being set in stone indefinitely.

I shall touch briefly on some important matters in the Bill. The question of the devolution of Executive functions is not handled properly in this draft. In the talks, we proposed a committee system similar to that originally envisaged for Wales. In order to reach agreement with the SDLP, we moved towards a form of Executive. However, that cannot be a Cabinet, because of the absence of collective responsibility, which is a consequence of the d'Hondt formula. Committees have not disappeared; nor have they become merely consultative. The agreement is clear: in addition to a consultative and scrutiny function, the committees will have a role in policy, departmental budgets, the initiation and consideration of primary legislation and the approval of secondary legislation.

Ministers have responsibility for the day-to-day conduct of administration within their areas of responsibility as defined by the Bill and the programme approved by the Assembly as a whole. However, they are clearly not Ministers in the sense understood in this place and in Whitehall. An earlier draft of the Bill about which we were consulted—I appreciate that fact—made the mistake of assuming that Assembly Ministers would be similar to Ministers in Westminster. It vested Executive functions directly in Ministers, as if the delicate balance in the agreement did not exist. That was clearly wrong, and we expressed that view a week ago on 10 July during consultation with the Northern Ireland Office and the SDLP. It was agreed that the draft should be changed.

The current draft in clause 18(3) vests all Executive powers in the First and Deputy First Ministers as if it were a joint presidency. It gives powers to departments and Ministers only to the extent that they approve. That overturns completely the concept of proportionality under d'Hondt, and it seems to run counter to the scheme in the agreement. Looking at the notes on clauses, I was amused to see the claim that the Government were relying on an equivalent clause in the Scotland Bill. That was true of the draft that we considered on 10 July, but it is not true of this clause, which is different.

The solution is simple and can be identified by examining the clauses in the Government of Wales Bill. I suggest that Executive power should be vested in the Assembly as a whole to be devolved by it in accordance with its Standing Orders. That avoids the draftsmen's obvious difficulty and gives flexibility to the Assembly. The scheme envisaged in the agreement may be difficult to work and we will not want to return to this place in order to make minor adjustments. This solution maintains the safeguard for all parties because the approval of Standing Orders is a key decision requiring cross-community agreement.

Clause 18(3) also runs somewhat counter to the agreement in giving power to the First and Deputy First Ministers to determine how functions will be exercised by Departments. That is contrary to the agreement. Incidentally, my role and that of my deputy, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), has been inflated greatly in the drafting of the Bill. The agreement gives comparatively limited functions to the First and Deputy First Ministers and I think that, when faced with difficulties, the draftsmen decided to dump them on us. I am not sure that I appreciate that.

The provisions regarding the north-south ministerial council and the British-Irish Council also appear to be inadequate. The detailed safeguards in the agreement have been omitted entirely. The rather bland references to agreements in clause 66 fail to take into account the fact that those agreements will be treaties in some cases, and the power to make treaties is an accepted matter. Clause 68 is particularly bizarre. It refers to bodies being established and the Secretary of State's opinion with regard to them. Reference is made to paragraph 9(ii) of the multi-party agreement, which points to what happens during the shadow period when, by definition, the Assembly is incapable of establishing any body.

We must redraft those clauses and remember that, anything that the north-south ministerial council can do, the British-Irish Council can do as well. There may be agreements between Belfast, Cardiff or Edinburgh of which Dublin can also be a part. There is no provision for that in the Bill; nor is there any appropriate provision in the Scottish and Welsh legislation. I hope that the Government will comment on that.

I said at the outset that the Bill provided an end to direct rule. That is what it should do, but clause 72 tries to preserve one of the most offensive aspects of direct rule: the power to enact primary legislation for Northern Ireland by Order in Council. Clearly, that practice should end.

I should also like the Government to reconsider including the Equality Commission in the Bill. That arises not from the agreement—which makes only passing reference to it—but from the quite independent review of fair employment legislation. There was some public consultation on the matter, but it was truncated arbitrarily to enable the Administration to grab what undoubtedly appears to be a convenient legislative vehicle into which the provisions may be stuffed.

I notice that the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and other equivalent bodies are uncomfortable with this. Their opposition may reflect a desire to maintain their own particular empires. We support in principle the concept of a one-stop shop, but we think that we do not have an appropriate legislative vehicle before us. Moreover, the Bill's provisions are drafted as if the Assembly did not exist. Provisions refer in large part to transferred matters. These need to be rethought. The sensible approach is to consider these matters again. The failure to recognise the incipient arrival of the Assembly seems to me, if I may say so, to be the last kick of the ancien regime. I hope that the Bourbons of the Northern Ireland Office are now prepared to learn.

I have to criticise the financial provisions in the Bill. It seems absurd that clause 45 was put into it. The clause tries to preserve the financial scheme of the Government of Ireland Act 1920, and does so in circumstances that are wholly inappropriate. The financial scheme of the 1920 Act was a failure within years of that measure's enactment and it was never applied in practice. Why has the clause been inserted in the Bill?

I appreciate the Government's desire to preserve the substance of the provisions of the 1920 Act while repealing the Act, but in this instance that approach is misconceived. We should have provisions for financial matters that are similar to those for Scotland and Wales. Introducing different financial provisions for Northern Ireland might lead some people to conclude that financial

[Mr. Trimble]

arrangements for Northern Ireland should be different from those for Scotland and Wales. We would be strongly opposed to that. We want the Barnett formula to continue.

Modifying somewhat the terms that I used in the final session of the multi-party talks, we see the agreement as addressing the wounds that have damaged our society, ensuring that our diverse traditions attract respect and, above all, laying the foundations for a healthy, vibrant democracy to replace the stagnation, frustration and powerlessness of the past three years. Of course, we welcome it.

6.21 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I very much welcome the Bill and the Belfast agreement. I am pleased that, before we break for the summer recess, this necessary legislation will be passed. I am sure that I was not alone in having doubts about whether the talks would succeed. Inevitably with Northern Ireland, there is always some pessimism, which I am sad to say is sometimes well justified. However, I am pleased, as I am sure is the large majority in the House, that agreement was finally reached.

I pay tribute to all those involved—including, of course, the two main parties in Northern Ireland, one representing the main stream of Unionism and the other Irish nationalism. I pay tribute as well to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her team of Ministers.

There was, of course, also the determination of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that there had to be a successful outcome, and by a certain date. As someone who is not always uncritical of the Government, when I praise my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for his efforts and determination, that should not be seen as a sort of ritual slap on the back from a Labour Back Bencher. I cannot imagine that there are many people who are in favour of the agreement who would not equally pay tribute to the work that my right hon. Friend undertook.

As for the previous Government, I believe that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) tried his very best to reach agreement. I also believe that he was well motivated. He had the full support of the Labour party over Northern Ireland when it was in opposition.

I understand all the reasons why, it was not possible at the time to arrive at the successful outcome on decommissioning, that the right hon. Gentleman wanted. That was unfortunate. However, I am sure, although the right hon. Gentleman is not present in the Chamber today—there is no reason why he should be—the previous Prime Minister fully supports everything said by the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay). Whatever may happen with subsequent amendments, there was little, if anything, in the hon. Gentleman's speech with which I could disagree. I hope that such unanimity over the Good Friday agreement will continue.

Sometimes, rather like the pessimism that I had over whether there would be an agreement, I am pessimistic about whether Conservative Back Benchers may force the right hon. Member for Bracknell to a different position. I hope not. As I have said, I hope that the unanimity which we have heard today from the two Front Benches will continue. I do not work on the basis that, when they both agree, that necessarily proves that we are embarking on the wrong course. That is a cynical view. The two Front Benches agreed on the Falklands and Iraq, and few have has suggested that on either issue the large majority in this place was wrong. I certainly do not believe that the Front Benches are wrong in supporting the agreement.

The important issue of decommissioning is, of course, part of the agreement, and it is in the Bill. It will feature in the work of the independent commission. I want decommissioning to take place. There is a responsibility on all paramilitary organisations that support the agreement to undertake the necessary decommissioning. Decommissioning is certainly important, but I have always taken the view that paramilitary organisations that support the agreement should not use arms. I have always seen that as the more important point arising from the political situation.

From the first, I was strenuously opposed to the IRA campaign. Like my Labour colleagues, I condemned on every occasion the crimes and atrocities of the IRA, as well as those of the loyalist gangs on the other side, whatever names they happened to take at any given time.

My constituency is very near Birmingham. We have not forgotten—we are not likely to forget—the terrible crime committed in November 1974, when so many people, half of them under the age of 25, were put to death. As we do not forget what happened in Birmingham and other places on the mainland, such as Warrington, nor can we forget—we have no reason to do so—the crimes committed in Northern Ireland itself, including Enniskillen and other places. Those were crimes against humanity, and they were to be condemned. I am pleased, like my colleagues, that at every opportunity I made my views perfectly clear, in the House and outside.

Even if we leave aside the crimes and atrocities that were committed—I never took the view that they should be—I never accepted politically that it was possible to bring about a united Ireland through terror. It seemed to me from the beginning that the very idea that it was possible to force through by terror tactics a united Ireland against the clear wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland was not on.

In September 1983, 15 years ago, when I was a member of a parliamentary Labour party delegation of the Northern Ireland group, I and other members went to Northern Ireland. We saw whichever political party was willing to see us. When I met the Sinn Fein leadership, like my colleagues, I said that terrorism would not succeed. I said that no British Government would agree to giving in to terror, and that no British Government, in any circumstances, would say, "Regardless of the wishes of the people in Northern Ireland, we are going to abdicate our responsibility."

Mr. Robert McCartney: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, as a result of the Bill, the political representatives who are inextricably linked with the terrorist groups that committed those crimes will be rewarded with places in government under an arrangement which they consider to be transitional on the way to their ultimate objective of a united Ireland?

Mr. Winnick: The hon. and learned Gentleman, deliberately or otherwise, allows himself to be swayed by IRA propaganda. For a quarter of a century and more,

the Provisional IRA and, linked to it, Sinn Fein, argued that such terror would achieve a unitary state in Ireland. That has not happened; indeed, groups have broken away from the IRA—the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) referred to them—because they believe that the IRA and Sinn Fein have betrayed the cause, as they would put it. It would be advisable not to accept the propaganda of the IRA or Sinn Fein, which would have us believe that they have achieved a great victory. That is not the case, and the hon. and learned Member knows it.

The Irish Republic's attitude was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Bracknell when he spoke about the changes to articles 2 and 3 of the constitution. I welcome those changes, which arise from the Belfast agreement. The Irish Republic, as he will agree, has always been opposed to the IRA campaign of terror and violence, has never questioned in practice the constitutional links between Northern Ireland and this country, and has recognised that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom.

The constitution of the Irish Republic has been so changed, and rightly so, and that has been approved in a referendum, as it had to be. That has clearly set out the fact that there can be no change in Northern Ireland's status without the consent of the majority of the people, expressed in the usual constitutional and democratic way. To some extent, that answers the hon. and learned Member for North Down.

Good working relationships between Britain and Ireland are absolutely essential. Time and again, difficulties between the two countries have meant difficulties in Northern Ireland. As the agreement shows in respect of strands 1 and 2, good working relationships are absolutely necessary. To put it mildly, there have been centuries of disquiet and difficulties between Ireland and Britain, but, to a large extent, good working relationships have been established over the past 10 or 15 years. That is highly desirable, and certainly in the interests of Northern Ireland.

I have been involved from the Back Benches in the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body, which was set up eight years ago. It brought together parliamentarians from both countries, and we have established good working relationships. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris), my predecessor as chair, who was one of the pioneers in setting up the group. He deserves great praise, and I was pleased to work with him as vice-chair over a number of years.

Mr. Mackinlay: Where are the members of the body?

Mr. McNamara: There are seven present, and four substitutes.

Mr. Winnick: I do not intend to find out how many members of the body are present. I know that members of it, if my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is listening, are active in Committee meetings, and do a very useful job.

I want to issue a warning. It was inevitable that elements on the republican side who are opposed to the agreement would be determined to continue to wage a campaign of terror. What the right hon. Member for Upper Bann said about those groups did not surprise me in the least. Those small republican elements are not concerned about democratic elections and could not care less about the referendum result in Northern Ireland or in the Republic.

Such groups believe that they have a dedicated mission to achieve a united Ireland regardless of any mandate from the electorate and they will continue to do what they can to inflict terror—I include the mainland in that—to achieve maximum publicity. The main thing is to ensure that these small republican groups that have broken away from the IRA are as isolated as possible. We should praise the work of the British and Irish security authorities, which made sure that what was likely to have been a devastating attack in London last week did not take place.

Opposition Members who oppose the agreement will, I am sure, accept the will and authority of Parliament, however great their opposition, but there are nevertheless elements on the Unionist side who believe that they can destroy the Belfast agreement by violence of one kind or another. Although I do not blame the Orange Order as such for what happened at Drumcree over the burning to death of three young children—I agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about that—it must take some responsibility for what occurred.

The Orange Order knew that the Parades Commission had been set up by Parliament, but totally ignored its recommendation and took no notice of the Chief Constable. Unlike the republican extremists, members of the Orange Order always say that they accept the rule of law and parliamentary democracy, but when an issue goes against them, as at Drumcree, they are not willing to accept the rule of law. What happened there showed that thugs who have no concern for human life were willing to use the protest to take the lives of three innocent children who would not have known the distinction between the Orange Order and the red order.

The protest at Drumcree has come to little; I am pleased about that, but how unfortunate it is that it took the loss of the lives of three young children to bring that about. Surely the lesson for the Orange Order—as for all organisations in Northern Ireland, whether on the Unionist or the nationalist side—is to accept the rule of law and to accept that recommendations should be accepted. I much welcome the agreement and believe that it is a significant way forward for Northern Ireland. I wish it the very best.

6.37 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): This is a magnificent day for Northern Irish affairs in this Parliament, not only because it marks my formal return to the Floor of the House of Commons following my serious accident about 12 weeks ago, but because it is an opportunity to bring together everything that many of us have strived to achieve. I pay tribute to those who have been Members of Parliament for much longer than I who have worked through the dark times, as well as through these more positive times, to try to achieve a renaissance in Northern Irish politics, which I did not expect this side of the millennium.

This is also an opportunity for us to note that we have too often discussed Northern Ireland in the context of the previous atrocity or outrage or the latest appalling act. Today, we have begun to consider a practical way to end all that, and move Northern Ireland into a fresh century. Of course the deaths of Mark, Richard and Jason were a

[Mr. Lembit Öpik]

step back; they showed that many people in Northern Ireland are still confused by the way forward, and that a few people are still willing to resort to violence.

Andrew Kearney's death is further evidence that we still have a long way to go. In some ways, however, the outcome of Drumcree showed that those tensions can be worked through. Despite the difficulties that we witnessed on television and in the fraught efforts of those who sought to achieve a reconciliation in Drumcree, we have moved to the next step in the tortuous and slow process towards a lasting peace.

I pay tribute to the work done by the Secretary of State and her team of Ministers. Watching events from my hospital bed, I was inclined to believe that, given the opportunity of trading places with them, I would choose the continuing hospitality of the national health service.

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), who have been elected to important positions. They have the opportunity—or perhaps the burden—to carry forward some of the most controversial aspects of the important precedent that will mark the effectiveness, or perhaps the ineffectiveness, of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Had I had the opportunity, I would have voted for their election myself.

As this is the Bill's Third Reading—[HON. MEMBERS: "Second Reading."] I stand corrected. I landed on my head in the course of my accident, so I hope that hon. Members will be patient if I make the occasional small error. As this is the Bill's Second Reading, I shall not go into great detail about the amendments that the Liberal Democrats propose, but I am greatly heartened that Ministers intend to listen seriously to any proposals that would enhance the Bill.

We all know why direct rule has been necessary, but we should not let that blinker us to the idiocies to which that has sometime led. I have never pinpointed a farmyard track in the Falkland islands and suggested how it could be re-routed; perhaps the penguins would have a better idea than I in that area. In the same context, I do not see why I should be entitled to legislate or participate in debates in this Chamber on farmyard tracks in a part of Northern Ireland with which I am not familiar, yet that has been the case over the past two decades.

The Bill represents a golden opportunity to end that, by establishing an Assembly to make those decisions in the name of Northern Ireland, not on our behalf but on behalf of local people. The Assembly will work democratically and from an informed standpoint. After all, local people have to live with those decisions, and they are best able to judge whether the decisions have been a success. It has already been said that the Bill contains various insurance policies. Perhaps we should be a little bolder and more willing to delegate responsibilities to an Assembly that ultimately we must trust to carry devolution forward.

Still, it can also be said that the devolution opportunity within the Bill is flexible. The reserved powers provide the House with the chance to delegate more responsibilities to the Assembly as time goes on. I would expect us to default to the assumption that we will hand over more responsibilities as quickly as we can. Incumbent on an Assembly receiving those extra responsibilities is the duty to handle them sensibly.

Although the Bill deals predominantly with strand 1 of the Good Friday agreement, we should not neglect the other parts of the agreement or the process that led us to where we are today. I was glad to hear the positive tones of the Secretary of State's response to a question about strand 2 put by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) last week at Northern Ireland Questions. Incidentally, I am grateful for my hon. Friend's work when he stood in for me during my convalescence. Strand 2 is proceeding apace, and the north-south ministerial council will be in place by 31 October—an appropriate date because I always feared that the bogeyman of Halloween would get us if we did not achieve that deadline.

The British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body has been very effective. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on finally conceding his envy at not yet being on that body. I assure him that many of us will lobby hard to ensure that he joins us one day.

Mr. Mackinlay: I would turn up.

Mr. Öpik: It is encouraging that most members of the body have turned up. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have worked hard, and we look forward to the body being converted into a partner as matters progress.

Dr. Godman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body will probably be laid to rest next year because of the strand 3 agreement, which creates a British-Irish Council made up of representatives of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly, this Parliament and the Dail?

Mr. Öpik: It is interesting, albeit frightening as a Member, to think that such a successful body could be wound up, but the hon. Gentleman is right—it is a reasonable possibility. It would be a great loss if its work and the connections that it has built up over the years were to be lost. Perhaps it should be regarded as one of the bodies from which a future body could evolve.

Strand 3, which deals with intergovernmental matters, does not come within the ambit of the Bill. Despite the Bill's emphasis on strand 1, it is the "settlement" Bill that its name implies, because it encompasses all the major issues. The Bill can be dealt with in this House in relation to the Good Friday agreement.

The title "settlement" Bill is particularly appropriate, because we have often been close to a settlement in the past. Progress in Northern Ireland is not new; there was political progress in 1974, 1982 and 1991. The history of progress in Northern Ireland was gathering dust, because each time it was overcome by inertia or negated by regress. Progress in Northern Ireland is as common as Christmas, but settlements are as elusive as Santa Claus. Since my childhood, as I have watched politicians on television, I have been disappointed to see hope, promise and expectation dashed at the last moment. Now, on this occasion, we seem to have overcome many of the hurdles, and moved far further than ever before in my lifetime.

That is the challenge this time. We have had the talks about talks, the elections to talks, the talks themselves, the negotiations, the deal, and the agreement. We then

had the success story: the referendum followed by the elections. However, we have yet to settle the final Bill, which must turn the agreement into a settlement. If we do our job well over the next fortnight, the agreement could be transformed into a lasting triumph. If we do not, the good intentions behind the Good Friday agreement may remain just good intentions.

The Liberal Democrats' role during consideration of the Bill is to help to transform the agreement into a settlement, which means ensuring that the spirit and letter of the agreement are translated accurately into legislation. The Bill could be improved in a number of areas, and we shall table a few amendments so that it mirrors the agreement more effectively and clarifies some vagaries that could cause problems if they are not clearly defined now. Although we agree with the majority of the 82 clauses, we shall propose specific amendments in Committee—for example, to clauses 22, 38 and 66. Those amendments will strengthen the settlement, so that everything that has been achieved to date will not be brought down by uncertainty.

We hope that our consistent, constructive contribution will aid the spirit of co-operation that is so often seen in Parliament on Northern Ireland issues. Furthermore, we hope that the Government will accept our proposals in good faith. Our aim throughout will be to help convert the agreement into a rational and reasonable law. I hope that that approach will be taken by all hon. Members, regardless of their party. I appeal to the democratic instinct of those who opposed the Good Friday agreement. It is clear from recent results that the balance of people in Northern Ireland, from all traditions, has been willing to give the new order a chance. It behoves us to honour their aspirations for a lasting settlement.

I have always enjoyed speeches by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. Indeed, it has sometimes struck me that Ministers would be well advised to consider closely the perspectives with which many on the Government Benches disagree, as they unquestionably provide an insight to the attitudes of many people in Northern Ireland. I have great respect for people with whom I have, on occasions, disagreed intensely on Northern Irish affairs, but I do not question for a moment that they represent a significant view that must be taken into account. Their contributions are valid and necessary if a lasting peace is to be achieved.

I trust that even the sceptics among us will want to maximise the Bill's effectiveness. I hope that Conservative Members will participate positively. Some hon. Members may have assiduously opposed the agreement, but my early impression is that they, too, will add value to the debate.

If, like the majority of people in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the mainland of the United Kingdom, we support the agreement, we must understand that it cannot be renegotiated: a deal is a deal. As politicians, we must be particularly conscious of the fact that our word should be our bond. We would not enter into a business contract and expect to renegotiate it unilaterally afterwards, and so it must be with the Good Friday agreement. We would be showing bad faith to all those who voted for it in May if we tried to add conditions in the Bill that were not in the agreement. That is what the enemies of the Bill—those who resort to the use of violence, bombs, guns and coercion—seek to do.

People with strong feelings can still be manipulated by those behind the scenes who do not accept the democratic will. Our challenge is to show that they have no currency in influencing the Northern Ireland agenda. I do not believe that the new decision makers in Northern Ireland or the more established legislators in the Chamber will succumb to those who use violence and non-democratic means to try to destroy or harm the achievements that have so far been made.

There are still tensions: Northern Ireland politics is hot, but it is not burning. The challenge is to turn those tensions into positive energy that can drive Northern Ireland's economy and culture, and repair the damage caused by the hate and the dissonance.

I welcome the urgency with which the Government have introduced the legislation. Parliamentary time is a precious commodity: it converts directly into the political capital on which we all depend for our positions in the House. The urgency with which the Bill has been treated suggests that the good will of the Good Friday agreement is alive and well.

I hope that, in line with that spirit of good will, hon. Members will not clutter this debate or any other stage of the Bill with explanations unrelated to the agreement. I also hope that the Government, in their eagerness to thrust the Bill on to the statute book, do not overlook any important issues raised in the debates. I am glad that the Government will have the summer to reflect on the debate before the Bill is considered in the other place. Urgency is welcome, but cutting corners would be unforgivable.

The Liberal Democrats warmly welcome the Bill, and look forward to working with Ministers. Also, we welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to taking a sympathetic and flexible approach to amendments that will improve the Bill.

Finally, I admit that I am surprised we have got this far. At times I have felt positive, and at others I have felt a sense of despair. However, we have made it, and it behoves us all to do what we can to achieve a settlement of which we and Northern Ireland can be proud. We must create something that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland can turn into a living settlement and, above all, that turns the Good Friday agreement into a settlement that in Northern Ireland makes every day a good day in Northern Ireland.

6.53 pm

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): I thank the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) and other hon. Members for their kind words. I welcome the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire back: it is a pleasure to see him again in one piece, and I am sure that all hon. Members would echo those sentiments.

This is a long, complex, difficult and mould-breaking Bill. It will take us into a new assembly, a new century, a new millennium and, I believe, into a new era of trust and agreement in the north of Ireland. Given its complexity, I thank the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), for holding consultations, which were helpful to us. I have no doubt that they were helpful to other parties, and that the Minister will see us again for further consultations, because it appears that they will be needed.

[Mr. Seamus Mallon]

The Secretary of State said that the Government will table amendments. We await those amendments either in this place or in the other place. As the Bill proceeds, clarification will be required.

I have one abiding commitment: the legislation must be based on the letter and the spirit of the agreement that we reached on Good Friday. The Bill must include provision for all the assembly business, for the north-south institutions, the Council of the Isles and for the constitutional commitments and guarantees given. This legislation is not negotiable. Everyone who signed the agreement has a duty not just towards the agreement, but towards the people of Northern Ireland who gave their mandate. It is a duty towards the other parties not present who signed the agreement. I should point out, lest we forget, that another sovereign Government signed the agreement. It is a duty on all of us who signed the agreement and who want to implement it to achieve lasting peace, stability and a new quality of life for everyone. We are the custodians of the agreement. We stand by that agreement in all its manifestations, in its entirety and its integrity.

Implementing the agreement will not be easy, as opinions are divided. The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and I have had and will have difficult roles to play. It is not a recipe for disaster, as the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) suggested. I do not see it as a joint presidency, as was implied in another speech. I see it as something much more important. It is an honest attempt by the two communities in the north of Ireland—nationalist and Unionist, Catholic, Protestant, and dissenters—to grapple with the problem that can be dealt with only on the basis of trust and agreement and by working together.

We stand by the agreement and we will stand with the people who have decided, in a referendum and an election, that this is what they want us to do. We shall implement their wishes as expressed in the referendum and in the election with fear of nobody and favour towards no one. I believe that we must proceed on that basis.

Our task will not be easy. We have functions under the agreement and the Bill in relation to the north-south ministerial council, the shape and operation of the new Assembly, a new civic forum, a new Council of the Isles, the designation of departments and the steerage of the creation of a new Executive. That would be almost enough work for a parliamentary Session; indeed, it might be enough for a longer Session. Unfortunately, we must ensure that the business is completed and the necessary proposals are made between now and 14 September, and we shall need the help of the entire community to achieve that. We shall need the help of all our colleagues in the House, as well as the assistance of the civic community in the north of Ireland. I shall return to that later.

We have been through a pretty difficult time—a crucible. I refer to Drumcree and Ballymoney. Like the people of the north of Ireland collectively, we had to go through a pain barrier—and it was certainly painful; but three lessons emerged from it, and we must learn those lessons. First, the issue of marches and parades, counter-marches and counter-demonstrations must be dealt with now, by every sector of our community. It cannot be left until we approach the period next year when marches will take place. The heart of Northern Ireland cannot be made to bleed as it is now, every year, without a solution being reached.

The second lesson is that there are political agendas on both sides. There are street marches, and street protests. That is a fact of life: we must live according to it, and we must be aware of it in all our deliberations.

The third lesson is that we all pay the cost. We are talking about three white coffins coming out of a hearse, and about something in the region of £100 million going down the drain in the last few weeks. It may have been only £80 million or £90 million, or it may indeed have been £100 million. In any event, let each of us think of that in terms of our constituencies. How many schools, how many carers' wages, how many hospitals could have been financed by £100 million? We all pay the cost, so we must all do what we can to prevent such things.

I want to discuss three aspects of the Bill, with which my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) will deal in more detail. First, our party and the nationalist community—in the negotiations, and now—have wanted a legal base for the north-south ministerial council. That will come as no surprise: we all spent two years trying to negotiate it, successfully in the end. Paragraph 1 of strand 2 states, very explicitly:

"Under a new British-Irish Agreement dealing with the totality of relationships and related legislation in Westminster and the Oireachtas a North-South Ministerial Council to be established".

I want that to be carried through in the Bill.

In an early draft, there was a paragraph that continued the provisions of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, but it is no longer there. Clause 66 of the Bill requires the First Minister and his deputy to ensure participation in the council, and clause 68 allows the Secretary of State to set up implementation bodies during the period leading up to the transfer of powers; but, following amendments and further explanations, clause 26 of the original draft is no longer there. There may well be an argument that the establishment of the north-south ministerial council derives from an international agreement and not from legislation, but there is surely a requirement for an authoritative description of the council.

Concern has already been expressed about the human rights section of the Bill, and I share some of that concern. Substantial representations have been made. I understand from what the Secretary of State said that amendments will be tabled, and the Government will expand their thinking. I look forward to that happening before we finally decide on our position; but we will table amendments, and will try to ensure that both the spirit and the letter of the agreement underlie that part of the Bill.

Let me now deal with my final area of concern. In fact, "concern" is the wrong word; I consider it important. I believe that we must create a new civic forum. I suppose that many people see that as involving the "great and the good", but that assumption greatly underestimates the potential of the forum. I think that the forum—along with those who, like me, are elected to the assembly—has an opportunity to introduce a new dimension to life in the north of Ireland. I refer to the dimension of communities, and representatives of the various sectors. They will not just observe the political process; they will become, as representatives of a civic forum, a partner in that process, having responsibilities, having influence and being able to grapple with and solve the problems that we face.

I think—I know—that we have an opportunity to do something that is new and is needed: something that can be imaginative, but must deal with enormous problems. I believe that we will achieve that; I also believe that we will achieve it in a spirit, and a way, that will maximise public opinion in the north of Ireland.

The shadow Secretary of State gave advice to both Unionists and nationalists. I would never presume to speak on behalf of any of my Unionist colleagues in the House in regard to the acceptance of advice, but I can speak about what the right hon. Gentleman said about the nationalist community. Slowly, over many years, I have come to believe that each generation has a right and a duty to write its own history—that we cannot bind future generations, any more than we should be bound by the past that has been handed down to us. In that spirit, I believe that the suggestion made by the Secretary of State is right. We will not be bound, in terms of our actions, our imagination or our will to deal with that with which we have to deal.

7.8 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): The Bill fails utterly to live up to the Prime Minister's pledges and promises. At the time of the referendum in Northern Ireland—which has been much talked about this afternoon—we were led to believe that a range of issues would be dealt with properly before terrorist front organisations could be allowed to reap the benefits of the agreement. It has been admitted in the House that those pledges had a great influence on voters. As things stand now, IRA-Sinn Fein will be able to claim all the advantages without having to give up violence, without having to hand over a single bullet or an ounce of Semtex, and without even having to begin the dismantling of its terrorist machine.

The killing in north Belfast yesterday by republicans who are linked to the IRA demonstrates the necessity for this issue to be properly addressed and resolved. Gerry Adams has told us and the city of Belfast that the IRA has not gone away. The threat from other sources has not diminished. I am speaking about loyalist paramilitaries, who are also fronted in the Assembly by political leaders and who pose a real and continuing risk to the entire community. It is interesting to note that it is from their ranks that the police are interrogating people about the tragedy of the murders in Ballymoney. However, that is not given to the public. In other statements, the police are quick to say who they are interrogating and from which side of the community they come, but on this issue there is a wall of silence.

The police issued a statement that three Roman Catholic children had been murdered and they apologised for that statement because the facts were not so. In the home that night there were two Protestants, a man and a woman, and Mrs. Quinn. Three children were being brought up as Protestants, attending the Protestant school and Protestant churches. We know what happened and we know about the insinuations. I hope that no step will be spared and no stone will be unturned until the full truth of what happened in Ballymoney comes out. At the moment, some of those who are identified with the community that endorsed the agreement, who said they were for it and who were represented in the political life that brought about the agreement are being interrogated by the police.

In some respects, the Bill goes further than the agreement. It gives greater powers to Ministers on north-south issues than the agreement envisaged and set down in plain print. One of Irish republicanism's key objectives has been the destruction of the Union that binds Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. The Bill states that the Government of Ireland Act 1920 must go: it will be abolished by the Bill. The 1920 Act established the supreme authority of the United Kingdom Parliament over Northern Ireland. Some say that the removal of that Act is meaningless, but that ignores the massive effort by the pan-nationalist front to have that Act on the table. In particular, the Dublin Government campaigned to get rid of that legislation.

The Northern Ireland spokesman for the Conservative and Unionist party, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), made some amazing statements at the Dispatch Box. They do not stand up to historical scrutiny, let alone the facts of the matter. We are told that everything in the agreement is balanced. I do not see much balance in the removal of the 1920 Act. I draw to the right hon. Gentleman's attention the fact that other Acts, including the Union with Ireland Act 1800, are to be superseded.

We have been told that Dublin has amended articles 2 and 3 of the Republic of Ireland's constitution. How has it done that? Dublin has amended them by widening its claim, not on territory but on the people who live in that territory. Further, the changes that the south of Ireland says that it will make will be made only if the institutions with executive powers and functions for the whole of Ireland are set up. Until that happens, Dublin has the right not to proceed on the basis of the result of its referendum.

The 1920 Act will be abolished by this House at once, but the Irish legislation allows Dublin to revert to the original constitutional provisions for up to one year later if all-Ireland executive powers are not being implemented. Changes to the Irish Republic's constitution are provisional and conditional, while changes to Ulster's position within the Union are not so. In the referendum campaign, Northern Ireland people were bombarded by a series of promises, pledges and assurances by the Prime Minister and others who were increasingly desperate to persuade people to vote yes. The Bill and the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill show how little regard the Government have paid to the real concerns of the people of Northern Ireland.

People were led to believe that IRA-Sinn Fein would not get into government without giving up violence for good and handing in at least some of their weaponry. The Bill shows that the most that will happen is that if the Secretary of State thinks that the Assembly should debate the removal of individual Ministers or parties from the Executive, she can refer the matter to the Presiding Officer. The crucial factor is that only a vote by Members of the Assembly under the consensus provisions can remove any person or party from office. Do we expect IRA-Sinn Fein to vote themselves out of office?

According to some hon. Members, the election victory was just as great as the one in the referendum. It should be noted that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has 28 votes in the Assembly. Those Unionists who oppose this matter also have 28 votes, and the right hon. Gentleman owes his position to the representatives of two paramilitary organisations. I have already spoken about those people. The House should not

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think that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister had overwhelming votes because, in the context of the consensus on the Unionist side, the majority was three.

The Bill is unique in its description of the First Minister and the second Minister. They are not first and second: they are co-Ministers. The Bill states:

"A reference to—

(a) the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland; or

(b) the chief executive member,

shall be construed as a reference to the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly."

There are two Prime Ministers—one from the Unionist side and one from the nationalist side. It is helpful that the schedule gives us the definitions of the delegated Ministers and their powers.

The Bill fails to provide adequately for a link between a party and the terrorist organisation that it fronts. Under clause 23, the only link is to a Minister of the party concerned. That gives plenty of loopholes for Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to remain in office no matter what atrocities the Irish Republican Army carries out.

The interesting matter raised by Mr. Mallon—[HON. MEMBERS: "The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh."] Pardon me. I should say the second Minister designate of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Donaldson: Of the north of Ireland.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I call it Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) spoke about clause 26, about which I wrote to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister does not usually answer my letters speedily—in fact, he did not bother to answer my last three letters—but he answered that one very quickly. He insisted that the clause did not mean what I thought it meant. I was relieved that it was deleted when the Bill was redrafted, but then I found clause 66, in which the measure is written in another way. Will the Minister explain the difference between the original clause 26 and clause 66? I am glad that the second Minister of Northern Ireland thinks that the measure means what I thought it meant—we seem to be on the same wavelength, and I look forward to seeing the amendment that he says he will table.

The Bill forces Ministers not only to consult other members of a north-south body, but to make arrangements with them on transferred matters. That goes beyond the agreement. The Bill seeks to take apart the structures of the Union; it will put Northern Ireland under increasing influence from the south and will exert increasing pressures to destroy the Union.

The people of Northern Ireland know that. The Unionist people of Northern Ireland know it, as has been demonstrated by the division in the official Unionist party. Hon. Members should not think that they can ignore a substantial section of the community. Just as they cannot ignore the nationalists, they cannot ignore those who are at least 50 per cent. of the Unionist population. Hon. Members must realise that those people, too, have views that must be listened to and respected.

The lady who is the Social Democratic and Labour party Assembly representative for Portadown—

Mr. John D. Taylor: The Donegal lady.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I do not know where she comes from, but I know that she said that those who voted no were outside the pale. "We are the real majority," she said, "and they are really nobodies." The nobodies may have greater influence than hon. Members recognise. I say that those nobodies need to be listened to carefully.

7.24 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I join in the applause that so many hon. Members have given to my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State and to all those who took part in the negotiations. I shall not elaborate on that too much, not only to spare their blushes, but because of the pressure of time.

My first point concerns human rights, especially the right to choose an attorney. We have heard bad news from Derry today—Lord Saville has rejected the requests of the families at the tribunal for better legal representation. I believe that that puts the inquiry on to the wrong foot; it will put an enormous amount of work on the lawyers working for the families of the deceased and their dependants.

Dr. Godman: About an hour ago, I was told about the inadequacy of the legal representation offered by Lord Saville. I join my hon. Friend in saying that that is a matter of profound regret.

Mr. McNamara: Yes. I hope that Lord Saville will reconsider his decision.

It is important that the proposed Human Rights Commission should be effective, should be seen to be effective and should be properly respected by the Government of the day. The Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights was a brilliant body. It produced many fine reports that were strong on analysis and in their conclusions and recommendations, many of which—especially on human rights—were ignored by previous Governments. Sadly, even this Government ignored some of the recommendations on fair employment, which I believe should enjoy a proper status in the new arrangements.

The Human Rights Commission must have adequate powers—indeed, that must apply not only in Northern Ireland, but for the rest of Europe as a whole. At the Heads of Government meeting in Strasbourg, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister signed a document appointing a human rights commissioner for Europe. That was an important step, especially as the commissioner may well recommend that the emerging democracies in central and eastern Europe use a human rights model similar to the one that we are establishing in Northern Ireland. It is important that we get that model right; we do not want to give the emerging democracies the opportunity to say, "They haven't got this in Northern Ireland. If the Brits don't need it, why do we?"

Three improvements must be made to the measures on the commission. First, the Bill should specify that the commission has the right to investigate human rights abuses where appropriate by public inquiry. Secondly,

the commission should have the right to initiate litigation in its own name; clause 57 denies the commission that right, although the Good Friday agreement said that the commission's role would include,

"in appropriate cases, bringing court proceedings or providing assistance to individuals doing so".

That was not an either/or choice; the two were seen as complementary. I believe that the commission should be given back the right to bring court proceedings.

Thirdly, the commission is restricted to assisting only those individuals who bring cases under the Human Rights Act. That will—wrongly, in my view—prevent the commission from assisting individuals who want to bring cases with equally significant human rights implications under other legislation, such as cases involving assault in custody.

I know that some hon. Members will argue that the commission should not be able to litigate in its own name as amicus curiae because third-party cases will not apply under the Human Rights Act, but the Home Secretary has indicated that if a human rights commission were to be established for the United Kingdom in parallel to that Act, he would reconsider that restriction. It is of the utmost importance that the Human Rights Commission has that right in Northern Ireland.

I shall deal now with the Equality Commission. I join the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) in wondering why some provisions have been included in the Bill, as there is no need for them. In fact, I wonder whether, as has been suggested, the old regime was throwing in something that would not be properly considered and which would in many ways preserve the status quo.

It is the Equality Commission which has caused the biggest hue and cry in Northern Ireland. Of the 123 submissions made in respect of the White Paper, only 29 supported the single Equality Commission. It is significant that one of them was from the Confederation of British Industry—I do not want to say anything about new Labour, as that would be very wrong of me. It is important to note that all the important institutions—SACHR, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Fair Employment Commission, the Disability Council, the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the agencies representing ethnic minorities—are against the idea because they believe that it has not been properly thought through.

It is no great matter of principle whether we have one Equality Commission or whether all the commissions remain. It is evident that the Equality Commission has not been properly thought out in terms of its relationship with other agencies, its staff or the money involved, but we shall not have the time to examine it properly. We have six hours next Monday to deal with all the equality issues.

In the past, these matters have taken days to examine in Committee. In addition, there is no need for this provision to be in the Bill. I also wonder whether it has been included as an excuse to avoid including the suggested further fair employment legislation. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to bear in mind what the right hon. Member for Upper Bann and my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh said, and ask her to consider whether this provision should be included. We can examine the matter of the Human Rights Commission, but my right hon. Friend should reconsider the single Equality Commission.

Marjorie Mowlam: Yes, we included it in the Bill in a bit of a rush because it is part of the Good Friday agreement. Not to have included it would have meant that the complaints would have been even greater. Yes, the structures are there, but if my hon. Friend reads the provision more closely, he will find that the four chief executives of the commissions, plus representatives of the other four groups concerned, can shape it as they want. If there is no difficulty with the principle, this provision gives them the opportunity to choose the format with which they can live most easily.

Mr. McNamara: That is being a bit jesuitical, if I may say that. The agreement refers to the British Government considering the matter and undertaking consultation. That consultation was abruptly brought to an end and there was no undertaking by any party to accept the proposal. It was a question of what was noted in the agreement. I urge my right hon. Friend to think again, because I believe it is wrong. I note that my right hon. Friend did not disagree with the notion that the proposal was a way of getting round the need for extra fair employment legislation.

I come now to the policy appraisal and fair treatment agreement and putting it out to private contract or tender under the Equality Commission. Mrs. Joan Smyth, the chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, said:

"The responsibility to bring about equality should lie where the policies are made. And that is within Government".

Again, the Northern Ireland civil service has chickened out, as it has over earlier legislation and as it does all the time because it has always resented this fact. As the Assembly and Government Departments are going to have to consider it, the right place for it to be considered is within government so that decisions are referred to a strong, central body which can decide whether those decisions really meet proper PAFT criteria. Putting the matter at arm's length is a major error.

Finally, I greatly regret clause 79(5) which states:

"A certificate purporting to be signed by or on behalf of the Secretary of State and certifying that an act specified in the certificate was done for the purpose of safeguarding national security shall be conclusive evidence that it was done for that purpose."

That is the old clause 42 brought back again, something that we voted against and which we considered very wrong when we were in opposition. Now, we have the judgment in the Tinnelly case in Strasbourg. As I understand it—I was reading it in French, and it is a long time since I did French at school—Tinnelly has been upheld by Strasbourg. The original clause 42 and the current clause 79 are now outwith the convention on human rights to which, as we are told in the agreement and in statute, we should be paying attention. I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend would examine that point when we come to consider any alterations.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend said that she will be flexible. We have already tabled some amendments, and there will doubtless be more. She has been promised them like confetti at a wedding. It would be wrong to seek to affect the principles of or what is contained in the agreement, but I have to say that where matters are not

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specifically spelt out in the agreement it seems that the Government have taken the de minimis line rather than looking to expand and be generous.

Human rights issues are going to be important not only for the people of Northern Ireland; how we deal with them will be an example to the rest of Europe and to the emerging democracies. My right hon. Friend has to be bold and not restrict the powers of the various bodies. They must be shown to be open and strong, able to initiate proceedings and investigations and to assist claimants, not merely reacting to propositions put to them.

7.37 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Like most hon. Members, I support the aims of the Bill and want to see it work. I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State, her Ministers and the Prime Minister and, indeed, to the previous Prime Minister for all the work that went into creating a formidable achievement.

Because of the understandable speed of preparation, some of the arrangements are less than satisfactory from the perspective of public accounting and accountability for United Kingdom taxes. I know that there was some rapid consultation with the Northern Ireland Audit Office in preparation for the Bill, but I do not believe that there was any discussion with the Comptroller and Auditor General for the House who has a locus as we are dealing with UK taxes as much as with Northern Ireland money.

I shall talk briefly about a specific, relatively technical, but important matter—the scrutiny of expenditure in Northern Ireland of UK taxpayers' money under the Bill. If necessary, I shall table amendments in an attempt to correct matters about which I am concerned, but if the Government consider the points that I raise worth while, I should prefer them to introduce amendments.

I am sure that the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office will do all they can to help the Government with a difficult, technical, House of Commons matter—although it is not as difficult as what the Secretary of State has already achieved.

Between 1921 and 1972, the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Parliament was funded from the Northern Ireland consolidated fund and scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General, who reported directly to the Accounts Committee of the Northern Ireland Parliament. It was originally envisaged that Northern Ireland would be self-financing, but a series of ad hoc legislative measures provided for extensive subsidies from Westminster without ever correspondingly extending the scrutiny of the Public Accounts Committee or the National Audit Office.

With suspension of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1972, the Northern Ireland Audit Office reported to the Westminster Public Accounts Committee.

The current position is that the expenditure of Northern Ireland Departments is voted separately by Parliament on Northern Ireland estimates. The accounts of the Departments and other public sector bodies are audited and scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General, and his reports are laid before the House and taken by the Public Accounts Committee. Currently, the House's Public Accounts Commission determines funding of the Northern Ireland Office.

The essence of the Northern Ireland Bill is to transfer to the new Assembly's Executive from Northern Ireland Office Ministers the responsibility for the Northern Ireland civil service. Because of the Bill, the House will continue to approve supply estimates for the Northern Ireland Office, including the allocation to the Northern Ireland Assembly paid into the Northern Ireland consolidated fund.

The key points about scrutiny and accountability in the Bill are, first, that the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General will lose his statutory powers to report to the Westminster Parliament. Secondly, the House—in the form of the Public Accounts Committee—will lose its powers of overseeing expenditure from the Northern Ireland consolidated fund, which is £7.4 billion, but will keep oversight of law and order expenditure, which is £900 million. Thirdly, the Bill will largely restore for the Northern Ireland Assembly the oversight, audit and scrutiny arrangements that existed before 1972.

The Northern Ireland Bill, like the Scotland Bill, does not give Parliament or the Comptroller and Auditor General any specific powers to receive reports on, or to investigate, the use of public funds once those are transferred to the consolidated fund for Northern Ireland. There is no provision for direct accountability to the House by the accounting officers who will head the Northern Ireland Departments.

The proposed arrangements raise questions about the adequacy of oversight that the House could exercise over United Kingdom taxpayers' money voted for the Northern Ireland consolidated fund. The issues are particularly significant in Northern Ireland, where the proportion of United Kingdom taxpayers' subvention is very high. As the Secretary of State will know, it is about £3 billion in 1997-98—which is almost 40 per cent. of total expenditure of £8.3 billion.

Within Northern Ireland, moneys issued from the consolidated fund will be subject to the Assembly's scrutiny under Northern Ireland legislation—principally the Exchequer and Audit (Northern Ireland) Act 1921 and the Audit (Northern Ireland) order 1987, which provide a framework for estimates, accountability and auditing by the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General that is closely modelled on current United Kingdom practice. The 1987 order particularly ensures independence of the Comptroller and Auditor-General and the Northern Ireland Office's powers to undertake value-for-money investigations.

As a result of the overview of the Public Accounts Commission and the Public Accounts Committee, the Northern Ireland Office has developed in parallel with the mainland United Kingdom's National Audit Office. For that, I give my compliments and praise to my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), for his work on the Committee.

Therefore, in practice, the devolved Assembly will take over arrangements for accountability that closely follow Westminster practice and for public sector audit that are in line with National Audit Office statements. However, in principle—this is one of the two problems that I wish to raise—any current Northern Ireland legislation relating to the role of Comptroller and Auditor-General could be altered by the Assembly. That arrangement is very different from those for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, as in each of those cases scrutiny provisions are written into United Kingdom law.

Therefore—for example—because the independence of the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General is not stated in the Bill as United Kingdom legislation, the Assembly could dilute his independence by amending or repealing a relevant Northern Ireland order. Such a situation is not unusual—it has happened in Denmark, where Governments eroded the power of scrutiny. We will have to think about the possibility of such a situation developing in Northern Ireland not only in the next two years but in the next 20 or 120 years.

Furthermore, although the existence of the Accounts Committee in the previous Northern Ireland Parliament gives us hope that the Assembly will establish a similar committee, there is nothing to compel the Assembly to do so. There is also no precedent for a body equivalent to the Public Accounts Commission to determine funding of the Northern Ireland Audit Office independently of the Executive, as happens in the House.

The absence of any oversight by the United Kingdom Comptroller and Auditor General or the Public Accounts Committee of expenditure by the Northern Ireland Departments raises in this House serious issues of taxation without representation. There must also be concern about whether the brief audit provisions in clause 52 give the same assurance of independence to the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General as the Scotland Bill and Government of Wales Bill give to their respective auditors.

Those matters are particularly important for Northern Ireland for three reasons. First, as I said, the percentage of funding for Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom is almost 40 per cent., which is the highest percentage of any part of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, the history of management of public sector spending in Northern Ireland is not very good. In conversation with me, such management was described by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble)—I am sure that he will not mind my quoting him—as ghastly. Many management weaknesses have shown up in recent audit reports. Moreover, as the Secretary of State will know better than anyone, there is a history of paramilitary-based fraud in Northern Ireland. We should not expect that fraud or the related pressures to disappear overnight.

Thirdly, as we have seen in other parts of the United Kingdom, problems of waste and corruption are often endemic to authorities that are dominated over a long period either by single parties or by single coalitions. I support the power-sharing arrangements that we are creating for Northern Ireland and yield to no one in my admiration for the right hon. Member for Upper Bann and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon). Nevertheless, in the scrutiny arrangements that we build into the Bill, we must plan against the very long-term effect of having one coalition in power, which is perfectly possible under the arrangements that we are making.

I therefore ask the Secretary of State to examine two issues. The first is the House's continuing right to knowledge and scrutiny of UK taxpayers' money given to Northern Ireland—even if that is only as a fall-back option for the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General, to give him somewhere to go if things go wrong.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that if there is a coalition and no effective opposition within a body such as the Assembly to exercise principles of adversarial scrutiny, his point about accountability and the necessity for some scrutiny by the United Kingdom is all the more valid?

Mr. Davis: That is precisely the point that I was making. For understandable and real reasons—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. McNamara: There are 28 opposed in the Assembly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Is the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) giving way?

Mr. Davis: No, I am not giving way, but I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman. The point about our arrangements is that we have a tradition of 130 years of structured scrutiny of the Executive that will not exist there ab initio. We have to ensure—I hope that the Secretary of State will see the reason for doing so—that there is structured scrutiny if, as is possible, there will be a single long-term coalition. In other countries in Europe—Austria comes to mind—extremist parties have developed simply because there has been a single coalition in power which has led to suspicions about how government is run. I should not like the same thing to be visited on Northern Ireland in 20 or 30 years' time.

I should like the Secretary of State, secondly, to examine the possibility of mirroring the arrangements that we have discussed for the Welsh Office and the Scottish Office—in the Welsh case, in talking to the National Audit Office beforehand; in the Scottish case, in debate in the House—to guarantee that the independence of appointment, funding, choice of work and dismissal of the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General and National Audit Office is written into United Kingdom legislation. If she does that, I shall do all within my power to facilitate the speed of the Bill's passage through the House.

7.48 pm

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I begin by welcoming the Northern Ireland majority commitment to the Good Friday agreement and by congratulating all those who played a leading role in achieving it. Although I sometimes feel the smallest frisson of disagreement or annoyance with the Government, I take great pleasure in what they have achieved in Northern Ireland.

Only days ago, we had reason to fear that it would all unravel, and that, once again, intransigence would win, so it was heartening that so many in both communities recoiled at the murder of innocent children and at the attacks on the police and the armed forces at Drumcree, declaring that they would have none of it. We owe much to those who have had the courage to stand up to extremists on their own side.

Courage is a much over-used word in politics: it usually means merely having the backbone to disagree with one's own side. The Labour Whips do not kneecap people or carry out politically motivated murders, however. We must put the courage of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the hon. Members for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) and for Foyle (Mr. Hume) and

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others into its proper context. They showed true courage and played an admirable role, for which the entire British Isles should be grateful. I congratulate the Government on making it clear that they would not give in to extremists on either side.

The behaviour of one party has been less than admirable, however: the Conservatives have created unnecessary difficulties in respect of the Bill. For many years in opposition, Labour stood faithfully by bipartisan policies, but the Conservatives have shown themselves less than willing to fulfil the role that we accepted for so many years.

For some odd reason, the Bill lacks the resonance of the first sentence of the Scotland Bill. I recommend to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State the inclusion of similar wording. Clause 1 of the Scotland Bill reads:

"There shall be a Scottish Parliament".

That simple ringing statement was noted throughout Scotland. A statement such as, "There shall be a Northern Ireland Assembly" might well have a similar effect in Northern Ireland.

Like the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly will have full freedom to legislate on matters that relate to the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Departments. It is interesting to see how often the Bill reflects the legislation relating to Scotland. Scottish Members are glad to have been of service.

The civic forum, which allows more women to participate, is a new development in Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that, at long last, some half a dozen women have been elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. More women were elected to represent Northern Ireland at that one election than in the entire history of Parliament. Women's voices will also be heard in the civic forum. As a result, social policies in Northern Ireland are likely to reflect more truly the community there, especially on matters of general interest and concern when no sectarian disagreement is involved.

There is a great deal to welcome in the Bill. The creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly have opened up a new approach to the governance of Northern Ireland. Irish politicians have also mentioned that point.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition is also to be congratulated on its contribution to the democratic process, as are the Government on being progressive enough to welcome the idea of the civic forum and establish it in legislation. I also welcome the legal underpinning given to the bodies mentioned in clauses 66 and 67. I have had only brief experience of the British-Irish parliamentary body, but, in a short time, I have seen how well elected representatives from the Republic of Ireland and from the United Kingdom can work together to the benefit of the island of Ireland. I have high hopes of those bodies, and of strand 3 in particular. The assurances that we built into the three strands have played a fundamental part in overcoming doubt and suspicion and making progress.

A thought occurred to me about the strand 3 body, which, through the good grace of the Government, did not specify that Scottish representatives had to be members of the United Kingdom Parliament. It has been accepted as highly appropriate that newly elected Members of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly should have the right to participate. No one would have objected if the Government had not taken that decision—if they had stipulated membership of the United Kingdom Parliament alone. There is a key point to be made. I am sure that participation of representatives of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly will be very welcome to people in Ireland, particularly because of long-standing historical connections.

It is pity that no Scottish National party Members are present in the Chamber, as I should like to put the point to them. If Scotland separated from the rest of the United Kingdom, it would not necessarily be able to participate in that body. Its role would depend on the terms of whatever agreement had been reached in respect of its separation from the rest of the United Kingdom. I do not think that the majority of people in Scotland want to say goodbye to having any influence on events in Northern Ireland. As no SNP Member is present, we cannot find out whether the SNP has a policy on that, or whether it has been trashed on the internet in recent weeks.

I do not believe that the equal opportunities provisions were added to the Bill as an afterthought. I am pleased that our progressive Government realise that equal opportunities are a major aspect of our lives and have written that principle into the Bill. When I saw the White Paper and the list of ways in which discrimination would be unlawful, I used it to improve the Scottish legislation.

Scotland does not have a separate equal opportunities commission, but it will continue to have an EOC office relating to United Kingdom legislation. There is much to be thought through as to what should happen in Northern Ireland. Unnecessary difficulties could be created by the existence of separate legislation on equal opportunities in different parts of the United Kingdom. I should like Northern Ireland to have the same degree of autonomy that we have in Scotland, so I shall follow the debate with interest, and may sign some of the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). The important principle is that there should be autonomy in practice which might lead to universality in legislation.

Finally, I should mention the inclusion of the European convention on human rights, which was particularly welcomed by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg a few months ago. COE members representing 40 European states welcomed it, because the entire process devised to achieve a way forward for Northern Ireland could be a useful guide to resolving conflicts in other parts of Europe. The progress that we are making tonight will not only affect Northern Ireland but may provide lessons for other parts of the world. For that reason, it is all the more welcome.

7.58 pm

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): The hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) spoke of courage. She congratulated the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) on their courage. Without in any way attempting to detract from their contributions, may I say that it is easier to be courageous when one has the big battalions on one's side and enjoys the plaudits of all the major parties in the House?

Everyone—particularly politicians—would like to be loved. All would like to be on the side of the angels. All would like to be in favour of peace, justice, goodness, equality, love and hope—all sentiments in which both democrat and dictator have, from time to time, wallowed. Those concepts of false sentiment and cheap emotion are the coin in which too many politicians increasingly deal. It enables them to ignore the real issues, suppress the unpalatable differences and dress everything up in spin and spoof. By the time the electorate wake up to the realities of what really matters, it is too late.

Nowhere was that more apparent than in the conduct of the referendum. It was plain that every artifice of government, propaganda, pressure, money and control of the media was brought to bear on the people of Northern in order to obtain the yes vote that was obtained. Indeed, the propaganda in which the Government engaged would instantly have been declared unlawful in the other part of Ireland. Legislation in the Republic provides that, on any referendum issue, both sides of the debate must be fairly and adequately reported. That did not occur in Northern Ireland, where the yes campaign was supported in 70 per cent. of coverage on Ulster Television and the BBC, and in 71 per cent. of coverage in the three major local papers, the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *News Letter* and the *Irish News*. Curiously, that almost exactly reflects the results subsequently obtained in the referendum.

Mr. Öpik: Does that not suggest that, in fact, the media merely reflected the public mood?

Mr. McCartney: No; with respect, I do not think that it does anything of the kind. As I have said, such imbalanced reporting would have been unlawful in the Irish Republic, which has rather more experience of referendums than we do.

During my entire professional and political life, I have been dedicated to the principles of democracy, equality and justice, which I have endeavoured to serve. I loathe and detest any violence that serves any political end; I have condemned it unequivocally. During the 14 months that my party spent in the negotiations, I refused to have any dealings at all with representatives of loyalist paramilitary parties, who were present on the basis that they were representative of armed organisations. I made it clear that, regardless of whether Sinn Fein was ever admitted, I would not enter into substantive negotiations with any party—loyalist or otherwise—that was a front organisation for terrorist groups that retained arms. My position, and that of my party, has always been entirely consistent.

It has been suggested by some hon. Members who have spoken in the debate that the Belfast agreement and the Bill are triumphs of democracy over terror. I believe that they are nothing of the kind. They represent the appeasement of terror—not just by the present Government but by successive British Administrations. They represent allowing those in Sinn Fein who have fronted an organisation that has murdered, maimed and pillaged both communities in Northern Ireland for 30 years to enter government, while, at the same time, permitting the IRA to retain all its weaponry and explosives.

Any suggestion that the IRA will decommission over the next two years is a myth. The IRA will not decommission and Sinn Fein will not call on it to do so. All that the agreement and the Bill that reflects it do is to call on parties that front paramilitary organisations to use such influence as they may have to persuade those organisations to decommission.

It is said that it does not really matter whether such organisations decommission, as long as they do not utilise their arms and explosives. The continued ownership and possession of such arms and explosives is an on-going form of political leverage to ensure that those who would use violence obtain their ultimate objectives. It is not without significance that Sinn Fein—or Sinn Fein-IRA, since, in the words of the Secretary of State, they are inextricably linked—views the agreement and the Bill that gives effect to it as purely a transitional phase. En route to what? En route to its ultimate objective of an united Ireland.

Much has been made of the principle of consent. It is said that, because clause 1 suggests that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom until the majority decides otherwise, the constitutional future of the citizens of Northern Ireland in the UK is in some way guaranteed. That is far from being so. As far back as September 1988, in the most comprehensive and detailed statement of Labour party policy on Northern Ireland that has ever been made, the whole score for both the agreement and the Bill was written. A process of creating institutions that would first allow consultation, then harmonisation, then full Executive powers to cross-border or all-Ireland bodies was envisaged.

It was accepted by the creators of that policy—one of the signatories being the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—that there could be no immediate disengagement from Northern Ireland, which was the real object of party policy. The policy had to be conducted by such a method that there would be

"no sudden withdrawal which might make disengagement impossible".

It was, and is, necessary to establish a series of institutions—under the Bill, the institutions are the north-south ministerial council and the all-Ireland implementation bodies—that create, perhaps on the European model, a functionally and factually united Ireland over a period of time. That explains why Sinn Fein-IRA openly expressed the view that the arrangements are transitional. There will come a time when, if such institutions expand, and are dynamic, as proposed in the framework document, Ireland will be factually and functionally united. At that point, the question of consent will arise—but consent to what? It will simply be consent that has become either inevitable or unnecessary: a consent to the formal transfer of the legal sovereignty of Northern Ireland to a united Ireland.

Mr. Winnick: Is the gist of the hon. and learned Gentleman's argument that the Government are really engaged in a sinister plot—clearly with the Opposition's support—to bring about a united Ireland by one means or another? Does he think that that is the objective of the legislation?

Mr. McCartney: Yes indeed. Why should anyone be aghast at my suggesting that? The Labour party policy document, which was signed by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), who was then the shadow

[Mr. McCartney]

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and countersigned by the present Secretary of State, states exactly that. The object of Labour party policy was to disengage from Northern Ireland and to create a united Ireland. If the hon. Gentleman does not possess a copy of that comprehensive statement of Labour party policy, I shall provide him with one.

Hon. Members talk about the protection provided by the need for consent. There is no protection in that, because the agreement provides for institutions that will circumnavigate such a principle of consent and allow only for a consent to the formal transfer of legal sovereignty. That dichotomy between the institutions required to obtain factual and functional consent and legal sovereignty is also spelled out in that party policy document. Mr. Kinnock, then leader of the Labour party, hailed the document as the only way forward. It explicitly set out a policy whose elements can be identified in the framework document and, more effectively, in the agreement and the Bill. I am not suggesting that off my own bat. It is for the Government to show that their proposals are significantly different from what they set out in their detailed and comprehensive policy document on Northern Ireland in September 1988. The facts are there for all to see.

Sinn Fein-IRA are one of the strong parties in the yes camp. Their endorsement of the agreement was heartily supported at the Ard Fheis when the agreement was put for approval. Speaker after speaker at the Ard Fheis said that the document was a transitional agreement and that they should advance on the political front, but should retain all their weapons, and certainly should not give up the threat of armed terror, particularly on the mainland, which had been such an effective weapon in advancing their political cause.

Those people, who are inextricably bound up with the IRA—that means that Sinn Fein can never be separated from the IRA—are to be entitled under the d'Hondt rule to two seats as Ministers in any proposed Government. They merely have to sign up to the democratic principles of non-violence. They will have no problem with that, because they will simply say, "We are not the IRA. We have no weapons. We are a party with an electoral mandate." They have said that all their political life. Everyone knows that they are synonymous in personnel, political objectives and policy.

Since 10 April, when the agreement was signed, Sinn Fein-IRA have been actively involved in acts of terror. In the communities that they exclusively control, they have been kneecapping—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am afraid that the hon. and learned Gentleman must resume his seat. His time is up.

8.13 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, together with other Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office, on their achievement in bringing the process as far as they have. I also congratulate and commend the courage of hon. Members and others who helped to forge the agreement. Bearing in mind the contribution of the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney), I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on having been able to move on from 1988 and helping to forge a new consent-based solution.

However, my loudest congratulations are for the people of Northern Ireland. On 22 May, a majority of 71 per cent. of them supported the Belfast agreement. On 25 June, 74 per cent. of them voted for candidates seeking a pro-agreement mandate. With those votes, the people of Northern Ireland changed the political landscape of the Province for ever.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said when introducing the Bill, in passing the Bill and devolving power to an assembly of Northern Ireland politicians, this Parliament will merely be setting up the necessary legislative framework to give expression to the desire of the people of Northern Ireland. That is a good enough reason to welcome the Bill, but there are others.

The strength of the Belfast agreement lies in its recognition of the value of diversity. Paragraph 1 of strand 1 says:

"This agreement provides for a democratically elected Assembly in Northern Ireland which is inclusive in its membership"

and is able

"subject to safeguards to protect the rights and interests of all sides of the community."

The morning after the Assembly election count was completed, *The News Letter* confirmed in its page one view how successfully that objective had been achieved, describing the elected Assembly as

"a democratic institution so broad in its diversity that it should become the envy of the world and a model for other divided communities to follow."

If that achievement is to be maintained, we must learn lessons from the past. A principal lesson from the past 25 years in Northern Ireland is that, in a divided society, if democratic institutions lack the necessary safeguards to ensure the participation of all sections in the decision-making processes, they will fail and the initiative will pass to undemocratic forces. For that reason, among others, the parties to the Belfast agreement placed great store on the importance of safeguards, setting them out in paragraph 5 of strand 1.

The achievement of those who forged the Belfast agreement will be lost if the Bill does not put in place the necessary safeguards to protect the new democratic institutions of Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, her colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office and those who serve them have ensured that the Bill does so. A principal safeguard is the requirement that key decisions of the Assembly are taken on a cross-community basis. The parties to the Belfast agreement reached consensus on the definition of a "cross-community basis". That phraseology translates into "cross-community support" in the Bill, but the definition remains the same.

The Bill sets alternative quotas for measuring cross-community support. Those quotas will apply to, among others, the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the passing of a resolution by the Assembly that a reserved matter should become a transferred matter or vice versa, the number and functions of Ministers and, in clause 34, the majority required for an issue that has generated a petition of concern from 30 or more Members.

The imposition of quotas on the democratic process can be a device to deny the will of the majority. That happened when the 40 per cent. hurdle was insinuated into the referendum on the Scotland Act 1978. That was a wrecking device designed to thwart the will of the Scottish people, and it succeeded. However, the measure of cross-community support in the Bill has come from the political representatives of the Northern Ireland people and, importantly, has been overwhelmingly endorsed in a referendum held on a simple majority basis, although the yes vote in the referendum would have satisfied the cross-community support test.

As important as cross-community support is the safeguard of a comprehensive commitment to human rights and the equality agenda, also included in the Belfast agreement. All who have a commitment to the protection of human rights and to equality of opportunity will welcome the new institutions set forth in the Belfast agreement and legislated for in the Bill.

The incorporation of the European convention on human rights in the law of the United Kingdom was a clear commitment of the Labour party at the general election. The Human Rights Bill will work best in conjunction with a human rights commission with powers and statutory responsibilities, such as those set out in part VI of the Bill.

On Second Reading of the Human Rights Bill, I argued for a human rights commission for the UK for that very reason. I argued that there was a need for a commission to promote ideas of human rights and to help promote the development of a human rights culture. Consequently, I welcome the setting up of a commission in Northern Ireland and hope that it will act as a catalyst for setting up a similar body in Britain.

There are those who will argue that the last thing Northern Ireland needs is another unelected quango. However, for a human rights commission to perform its necessary functions in Northern Ireland, it must be independent of both the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly, since part of its function is to ensure compliance by both of them with human rights legislation. I have reservations about the lack of transparency in the appointments process as set out in clause 54, but we will no doubt return to that matter in Committee.

For the reasons I have articulated—and because I am also persuaded by the arguments in the document "Creating an Effective Human Rights Commission for Northern Ireland" by Brice Dickson of the university of Ulster—I welcome the provisions in the Bill. Unlike some of my hon. Friends, I welcome the establishment of the Equality Commission and the attendant imposition of a duty to promote equality of opportunity on certain public authorities, while outlawing discrimination by other public authorities.

I draw the attention of Ministers to the differing descriptive definitions of public authorities in clauses 61 and 62. Clause 61 requires public authorities to "promote equality of opportunity", whereas clause 62 sets out where it would be unlawful to discriminate. I see no reason to have differing definitions of public authority in the clauses, and would welcome an explanation on the divergence.

In the long term—and like some of the parties who responded to the White Paper on the subject—I favour incorporation in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission itself of all the functions and duties to promote and police the equality agenda. I also hope that a Minister for equality will be appointed by the Assembly.

Those are long-term goals and, in the meantime, I believe that the aggregation of expertise and experience and the pooling of the resources of the four existing equality bodies in one significant commission will enhance the equality agenda in Northern Ireland.

The lack of confidence in the institutions of Northern Ireland has its roots, to some degree, in a perception of inequality by a significant part of the community. The Equality Commission legislated for in the Bill, and reflective of yet another safeguard from the Belfast agreement, will give significant weight to the equality agenda in Northern Ireland and will go a long way towards helping to sustain the confidence of that part of the community in the process of political reform.

For those reasons—unlike the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara)—I argue that the rightful place for the provisions is in the Bill. I am supported in that by the provisions of the Belfast agreement. I draw the attention of those hon. Members who doubt that the proper place for such legislation is in the Bill to strand 1, paragraph 5(e) of the Belfast agreement which sets as one of the safeguards for the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland

"an Equality Commission to monitor a statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity".

There is no better place than the Bill for that.

I wish to draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister of State to one matter that is troubling me. There may be a simple answer. Under head 10 of schedule 5 to the Scotland Bill, broadcasting—and, in particular, the British Broadcasting Corporation—is listed among the matters reserved to the UK Parliament. In my hurried examination of the Northern Ireland Bill, I cannot see whether broadcasting—and, in particular, the BBC—has been reserved to the UK Parliament. It may be reserved, but I should welcome a statement on how that will be achieved, as it is not obvious in the Bill.

I ask about broadcasting in particular because the matter created some controversy in Scotland. There were those who wanted to get their hands on the BBC; I have no doubt that there are those in Northern Ireland who want to do that, too. For consistency of devolution, that issue should be addressed.

I remind the House that, in supporting the Belfast agreement and in electing the Members of the Assembly, the voters of Northern Ireland formed an historic alliance between Catholic and Protestant and nationalist and Unionist peoples. We should not forget that they did so to bring stability and lasting peace to their community. We must not let them down, and we will not be doing so by passing the Bill.

8.24 pm

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): I am a Unionist who believes in Northern Ireland remaining within the United Kingdom, and believes that the people of Northern Ireland—Roman Catholic and Protestant—would be best served in matters of equality and justice by the United Kingdom Parliament remaining in charge of all affairs within Northern Ireland. None the less, I recognise that

[Mr. John D. Taylor]

the policy of the Government is to proceed with devolution throughout the United Kingdom—to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, perhaps, to the regions of England. We must fit in to the overall plan for the UK.

I served in many of the various devolved institutions in Northern Ireland—in the Parliament from 1965 to 1972, the subsequent first Assembly, the constitutional convention and then the second Assembly, which collapsed in 1986 following the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Yet again, we have another attempt at devolution in Northern Ireland. From my experiences in those four previous devolved institutions at Stormont, I fear that some of the weaknesses that were inherent in them and brought about their collapse exist yet again in this somewhat tortuous formula for the return of devolution to Northern Ireland.

It is a tortuous formula and a complicated Bill. None the less, the Belfast agreement—its proper name—has been welcomed throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, where it was approved in the Assembly of the Council of Europe. It has been welcomed throughout the United States. It was supported in a referendum in Northern Ireland and in the elections for the new Assembly. Indeed, the empty Press Gallery throughout this debate leads one to assume that the journalists have concluded that the Belfast agreement is safe and home.

That is not the case. There was considerable support for the Belfast agreement; it has slipped considerably in recent weeks—let us not pretend otherwise. To do so is to deceive the House and the wider public. Why has that support slipped? It is not because of the terrible deaths of the three children at Ballymoney. It is not because of the impasse at Garvaghy road, Drumcree. It is because one participant in the agreement is not honouring what the agreement was intended to achieve.

When the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) spoke today, I was surprised that, although he mentioned Drumcree and Ballymoney, he never once mentioned how the IRA is breaching the terms of the Belfast agreement, and is doing so in his own constituency. A 1,400 lb bomb near Armagh city luckily did not get into the centre of the city at the weekend because the vehicle carrying it got a flat tyre. A 600 lb bomb at Newry courthouse in the hon. Gentleman's constituency was luckily defused by the security forces.

In Newton Hamilton in the hon. Gentleman's constituency recently, dozens of Roman Catholic and Protestant businesses and homes were destroyed by a 1,000 lb IRA bomb. At the weekend, a Roman Catholic was murdered by Provisional IRA, or so it was stated. A man was badly beaten up by the IRA—a Mr. Kearney, a Republican from the Ormeau road, who would have died had the RUC not arrived in time.

Today, all hon. Members have received a faxed letter from Families Against Intimidation and Terror—which is not a pro-Unionist organisation, I can assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That letter says:

"The current Bill makes no reference to paramilitary violence being a bar to membership of the Assembly Executive which effectively means that Sinn Fein Ministers only need to say they are opposed to violence to stay in office while the IRA continue to be involved in violence."

There is a major problem.

Undoubtedly, the Belfast agreement was a setback for Provisional Sinn Fein—the IRA. They said that they would not agree to anything unless it was a united Ireland. Well, there is no united Ireland. They said that they would not agree to the removal of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution and the territorial claim of the south of Ireland over Northern Ireland. Well, the people of the south of Ireland have now agreed to remove the territorial claim. Then Sinn Fein said that it would never go into an assembly at Stormont. Well, some of its members were elected to the Assembly, and they are there now; they attended the first meeting. There has been progress on that front.

Moreover, clause 1 says:

"It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

Clause 5(6) says:

"This section does not affect the power of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to make laws for Northern Ireland."

That is the exact guarantee that the Scotland Bill will give the people of Scotland when it becomes law. There is progress, therefore, on constitutional matters.

Subsections (10) and (13) of clause 15 state that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister can also hold ministerial offices. Rightly, Members of Parliament who are Members of the Assembly have had great deductions from their salary. I am assuming that a First Minister or Deputy First Minister, if he is also a Minister, does not take both salaries.

I come to the key issue of the removal of Ministers from office, to which clause 23 applies—especially subsection (8). The clause says that Ministers must be exclusively committed to peaceful and democratic means. The Dublin Prime Minister has said that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked together. Today, the Secretary of State confirmed that that was her position—*[Interruption.]*—she is nodding yet again—in reply to a question that I asked at the start of the debate. However, she then passed the buck. She said, "But the removal of Ministers is not really for me; it is for the Members of the Assembly." Of course Sinn Fein—the IRA—will not expel its own members. No way.

Where does the SDLP stand on that issue? That is the point on which we need clarification. That will be the turning point for the success or failure of the Belfast agreement. It is time that we teased the SDLP out into the open, to give assurances to the people of Northern Ireland that it is fully committed to peaceful and democratic means, and that it accepts that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked together. We want to hear the SDLP using the same phrase as our Secretary of State used today, and as the Dublin Prime Minister has used several times. Once we hear that from the SDLP, we shall proceed to obtain other assurances.

On clause 56, I warn against too freely giving financial aid for legal advice and support on human rights issues. When I was a member of Castlereagh borough council, the Fair Employment Commission handed out money left, right and centre to people to enable them to claim compensation. There was one case that we knew that the claimant had no chance of winning; the council fought it and won. However, although we won the case, we had to pay the legal expenses and then charge the ratepayers for them. A borough council may do that, but private

individuals cannot afford to fight. They cannot pass on the charge to ratepayers; they must pay themselves. Often, an organisation, especially an employer, accused of discrimination will settle a case for a small amount of compensation instead of fighting it, although it may not have been guilty of discrimination.

Interestingly, although the Bill provides funding for the north-south ministerial council, it does not even allocate any money for the British-Irish council, which is of much greater importance to most people in Northern Ireland. It is not mentioned. Strangely enough, although the Assembly is setting up a seminar on all kinds of issues—such as human rights, the administration of various Government Departments, and the north-south ministerial council—there is no seminar on how the British-Irish council would work. Incidentally, has anyone ever told the Governments of the Isle of Man, Jersey or Guernsey that they are involved in the British-Irish council? Perhaps, if they have been told, the Minister will tell us the response of those three Governments.

Finally, I want to make a quick point on a constituency matter. Schedule 2 says that Crown property is an excepted matter. As I understand it, the foreshore of Strangford lough is Crown property. It comprises a major part of my constituency. Is it an excepted matter? Does that mean that we cannot discuss Strangford lough in the Assembly? That is an important issue for me as a local constituency Member, and for my colleague, the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), who represents Strangford village but not the rest of Strangford lough.

I have supported the Belfast agreement, although I have had doubts about some of the issues. As this is a Second Reading debate, I shall support the Bill in principle tonight, but there is no guarantee that I shall support it on Third Reading unless we receive further assurances on the key issue of the exclusion of people who are inextricably linked to paramilitary organisations when such paramilitary organisations are still carrying out murders and bombings.

Not only can the Secretary of State help on that matter as amendments to the Bill are debated, but the SDLP—to which she passed the buck earlier this afternoon—must clarify its position, because in the Assembly, by cross-voting, the majority of the nationalists must vote for the expulsion of such people if that expulsion is to take place, and we must have some assurance from the SDLP that it will do so.

8.36 pm

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): I am very pleased indeed to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. Anyone who knows my track record concerning Northern Ireland and the whole island of Ireland will know that I am delighted by the Bill. It may be one of the most significant pieces of legislation that I have had to deal with; it is certainly one of the most significant that I have ever spoken on.

Some of the speeches have not encouraged my hopes as much as they might have, but the Bill has every hope, when it becomes an Act, of ending one of the saddest legacies of the history of these islands. We must make it work. There must be a constructive approach. The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) and I agree on many things—if we leave Ireland out, on most things—but, with respect to him, we must not score points, however robustly. We must do the constructive job that he did at Stormont to bring about the Belfast agreement.

We are not out of the wood yet. Anyone who has had anything to do with the agreement—not least the Secretary of State, who has done a marvellous job—knows that we are living on a knife-edge in every respect. The agreement creates an enormous opportunity, but it also creates the dangers of failure and having to start all over again.

We can make the agreement work only if we get together. In Northern Ireland—with all respect to Northern Irish Members who are present—that is starting to happen. I welcome the tone of the speeches of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon). Both speeches were constructive. Each patently took into consideration the agenda of the other community. That is what all this is about, and will increasingly be about. The 71 per cent. vote in the referendum was a vote of both communities. The cross-voting in the election on preferences was again of both communities. That is enormously significant.

We must get the act together on the mainland as well as in Northern Ireland. I especially welcome the tone of the speech by the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), who adopted the right approach on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition.

All of us can and should take some of the credit for making the agreement succeed. Once or twice, I have trembled for the bipartisan policy, not least on the Opposition's vote on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, about which I shall say nothing now. It is essential that the bipartisan policy remains and is strengthened.

The full weight of all the political parties in the House, as has been apparent the speeches today, must be behind the Bill, pushing it through to become an Act, and making the Act work. The record of the Conservative party in government in recent years shows that it has been far from ever playing the Orange card again. It brought about the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The efforts of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) started a process that has been ably continued by the present Government. If we all get behind it, it can succeed.

As hon. Members will realise, I am telescoping my speech so that others may speak. On constitutional structures, I shall deal with the parliamentary aspect, which has been referred to in other speeches, but perhaps not in as much detail as I am qualified to speak of the workings of the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body, which has been of great use.

With reference to the parliamentary aspects of the Bill, strand 1 gives us the Assembly, which is a vital component that fits in with United Kingdom constitutional development. Strand 2 makes provision for a new parliamentary forum from the Assembly and the Oireachtas. That introduces another parliamentary aspect, which may initially lead to some confusion.

Strand 3 establishes the British-Irish council, which involves not the institutions with primary responsibility, such as the Northern Ireland Assembly, but the devolved institutions of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel islands—it is high time that there was an institution that brought them into the picture—and others, if appropriate, as well as representatives of the United Kingdom and Irish Governments. By definition, the task of the British-Irish council is consultative. No doubt it will be a useful body, although it may be somewhat bland in decision making.

[Mr. Peter Temple-Morris]

Strand 3 also sets up the British-Irish intergovernmental conference. There is no parliamentary shadow at that level. The Belfast agreement states:

"The elected institutions of the members will be encouraged to develop interparliamentary links, perhaps building on the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body."

That provides a link between the two sovereign Parliaments. We shall no doubt return to these matters in Committee. There is a need to think through the concept of parliamentary links under strand 3. There must not be too many bodies, but they must cover all aspects, allowing sovereign Parliaments to question sovereign governments.

On the release of prisoners and decommissioning, from the remarks that we have heard about clause 23 and other clauses there is no doubt those will form a considerable part of our debate. I shall lay out some general points.

It is fundamental to the peace process that it seeks to contain and bring the extremes into an accepted constitutional system. That system will succeed only if the extremes are within it. They are in it at present because there are no absolute preconditions. They will not be able to remain within it if unrealistic conditions are set for decommissioning or the release of prisoners.

Those two issues are complementary. Prisoner release has enormous significance on both sides of the sectarian fence. It will do more than anything to signify the end of war, which will help to deliver the real decommissioning that we all want. I believe that it will come, but it would be counter-productive to try to achieve too much too soon.

Let us all—the whole House—unite behind this worthy Bill, get it through and grant peace to the island of Ireland, a peace which has been too long delayed and is much deserved.

8.44 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): When the Secretary of State introduced the Bill to the House, she said that it was the Government's intention to put into legislative form the agreement reached on 10 April. It is worth the time of the House to consider how closely that has been done, and to use a few tests to determine whether it has been done properly.

This is the first major debate that we have had on Northern Ireland since the Assembly election—the last major debate was on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. I remember being told by many hon. Members on both sides of the House that the Prime Minister had played a key role in securing a yes vote in the referendum, and that that yes vote had produced a positive result in both the Unionist and nationalist communities.

We were told that a majority of nationalists and a majority of Unionists had voted yes. I made it clear that, statistically, it was obvious to anyone who knew Northern Ireland that a majority of Unionists had voted no. So that there is no doubt, I place it on the record now that the results of the Assembly election proved my case, and clearly show that the majority of Unionists are against the Belfast agreement. The majority of Members returned for the Unionist tradition are against the agreement. The majority of votes cast were cast for Unionist candidates who were against the agreement.

When the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) says that there was a substantial body of opinion in Northern Ireland against the agreement, that represents an overwhelming majority of his constituency, and a majority of the Unionist community, where he rightly says support for the agreement is decreasing as the days and weeks go past. He would know that better than most, as deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist party.

The right hon. Gentleman will have read in the newspapers recently that even one of his party's Assembly Members admitted that, although she had voted yes in the referendum, if she were asked to vote again today she would vote no to the agreement. She was not counted as one of the Assembly Members who would vote against the inclusion of Sinn Fein-IRA activists in a Government of Northern Ireland, and executive powers for an all-Ireland body.

That is the backcloth against which the House should consider the future of the Belfast agreement. The test that we should use is the commitment given by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the First Minister designate of Northern Ireland to the people of Northern Ireland in relation to what the agreement meant. They were vociferous at the time of the referendum. The Prime Minister made it abundantly clear on 6 May in the House of Commons that substantial decommissioning was required before sentenced prisoners could be released or Sinn Fein-IRA personnel could be in government.

In his Hillsborough speech, the Prime Minister went into great detail about the criteria that would have to be met before the Provisional IRA representatives, or representatives of any loyalist paramilitary organisation—although that does not arise, because they were roundly rejected by the Unionist electorate—could get into government.

In an interview with Des McCartan of the *Belfast Telegraph*, the Prime Minister was asked:

"How can you guarantee there won't be people in the Assembly who, by others' perception, are linked to the men of violence?"

The Prime Minister replied:

"Because the agreement provides very clearly that people can be removed or excluded from office, if they are pursuing non-democratic or violent measures."

When he came over the Northern Ireland and gave his five pledges, one of them clearly stated that those who used or threatened violence would be excluded from the Government of Northern Ireland. In the Belfast *News Letter* of 14 May, the Prime Minister said:

"People need to know that, if they are sitting down in the room of the executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly with other people then they are not sitting there with the guns under the table, outside the door and all the rest of it . . . That can't happen and we must make it absolutely clear that that can't happen."

I suspect that we are about to see whether it can or cannot happen.

I am sorry that the First Minister designate is not in the Chamber, as I should like him to show where in the Bill is the commitment that he gave the people of Northern Ireland on 9 May. In an article in the Belfast *News Letter*, he said:

"I think the unionist community has confidence in itself. We have the capacity ourselves"—

that is, the Unionist community—

"to exclude Sinn Fein from office, if we so wish, because we are going to have a majority in the Assembly, now that is clearly going to be the case. Why then should people worry what an Assembly

will do if they are going to have the majority in it? The Agreement itself is absolutely clear that only people who have a genuine commitment to peaceful means and a democratic process can accept office. Those words were fudged in the past, but they were fudged by governments. It's not going to be a question for Government in the future, it's going to be a question for the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives."

Where in the Bill is the right hon. Gentleman's commitment that Unionists can exclude Sinn Fein from government? He knows that there is no such provision in the Bill—and I suspect that he knew as much when he wrote the article. One of his colleagues got very hairy-chested about the matter. The Ulster Unionist party member David McNarry vowed that Unionists would not back down on the handover of weapons before Sinn Fein could take up positions in the Assembly. Mr. McNarry, who stood with the right hon. Member for Upper Bann at Castle Buildings after the agreement was signed, said:

"We are not going to be softies on this issue."

Those commitments stated that there had to be decommissioning before Sinn Fein got into government. They declared that Sinn Fein could not get into government if it did not renounce violence for good. There is no such provision in the Bill. The only provisions in the Bill are either that Sinn Fein will put up its hands and surrender, saying, "No, we cannot take the pledge of office, because it requires us to have given up violence for good"; or that the Assembly will take a political vote that puts Sinn Fein out of, or excludes it from, office. On that basis, Sinn Fein would have to vote itself out of, or exclude itself from, office, or the SDLP would have to do it. Can anyone honestly see the SDLP voting to put Sinn Fein out of the Government of Northern Ireland? I do not think that that is a remote possibility.

In a previous debate on the sentences legislation, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh made it clear that he wanted the Executive to be inclusive, and that no preconditions should be set down in terms of membership of that Executive. As far as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the First Minister designate of Northern Ireland are concerned, their pledges have not been honoured in the Bill. They have once again betrayed the people of Northern Ireland.

Apart from there being no effective means of excluding or removing people from the Government of Northern Ireland, another promise was made to the people of the Province. They were told in clear terms by both the Prime Minister and the First Minister designate that the north-south body would be accountable to the Assembly. I challenge the Government to show where the Bill states that the north-south body or the implementation bodies will be subject to the will of the Assembly.

There was considerable discussion about clause 26 in the draft legislation. I noticed hon. Members around the Chamber looking with some bewilderment at clause 26 of the present Bill, but, of course, the original clause is not there. Clause 26 of the draft Bill stated:

"A Minister or Northern Ireland department may . . . consult on any matter with any authority in Ireland . . . enter into agreements or arrangements with any such authority in respect of any transferred matter".

We made it clear to the draftsmen that that went well beyond even the scope of the agreement. The clause gave power directly to Ministers to enter into arrangements and agreements with their counterparts in the Irish Republic or with any authority in the Irish Republic. Ministers would not be accountable to the Assembly or their Executive colleagues.

Mr. Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ministers' decisions and agreements should be subject to ratification by the rest of the Assembly?

Mr. Robinson: I believe that the work of the north-south body and the implementation bodies should be subject to the will of the Assembly, but it is not under this Bill. It is essential that those bodies are brought under the Assembly's authority.

The wording of clause 66 in the current legislation is almost identical to that of the old clause 26. It uses the same words, with a slightly different introduction regarding participation. The Minister must—not only for my edification but for the benefit of the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh, who is concerned that clause 26 has disappeared—tell us what the effect of clause 66 will be. Under that clause, can a Minister make an agreement or arrangement—albeit one that does not require legislative input—with his counterpart in the Irish Republic without the north-south body's being aware of it or the Assembly's approving of it? That is a simple question, and I hope that the Minister will respond before the debate concludes.

Hon. Members referred to several matters in relation to Northern Ireland's constitutional position, which is outlined principally in the Bill's opening clauses. It is very clear that, far from the Bill's leaving Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, it introduces a transitional state. The Bill moves Northern Ireland from its full and rightful place within the United Kingdom out on to a limb; it is being pushed towards an all-Ireland state. That is undoubtedly the Bill's political intention, and I believe that its provisions will encourage that eventuality.

As far as the Union with Ireland Act 1800 is concerned, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann told us at the time of the referendum that it would be unaffected. That was clearly a misleading statement. Clause 2 makes it very clear that the Act is affected: it is superseded by this Bill. That is the whole import of clause 2.

Clause 1 makes it clear that the Secretary of State may call a poll if she believes that people might wish to leave the United Kingdom and form a united Ireland.

Why should going into a united Ireland be the only option for which the House would legislate? Is the House taking upon itself the right to say, "We shall divorce Northern Ireland and at the same time tell the people of Northern Ireland with whom they will have to live"? That seems an outrageous proposition for the Government to put forward.

If the Government are saying that if the people of Northern Ireland want to leave the United Kingdom, they will make the necessary arrangements for them to do so, they are entitled to do so. However, they are not entitled to say, "If the only option is to go into a united Ireland, you can go in that direction, but anything else is outside the ambit of what the House is prepared to legislate for." The House does not have a right to say to the people of Northern Ireland, "We shall allow you to leave the United Kingdom but only if you go into a united Ireland," and allow them to do so only by simple majority voting in a poll.

[Mr. Robinson]

When voting is referred to elsewhere in the Bill, we find references to cross-community voting, consensus voting and parallel voting. Those are the requirements. However, when it comes to leaving the United Kingdom, a simple majority of one will be sufficient, thank you very much.

It seems outrageous that everyday decisions must be made on the basis of consensus because it is believed that consensus is required in a community as divided as Northern Ireland, but the most major and fundamental change in the life of the people of Northern Ireland—taking Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom and into a united Ireland—can take place by means of a simple vote. That is an absurdity: I trust that the Government will examine the amendments that are tabled on that issue, and allow either a weighted vote, as is done in many constitutional votes throughout the world, or a cross-community vote in the Assembly before a poll can be called under schedule 1.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

8.59 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): On moving the Second Reading, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that this was an historic Bill. I think that that is a true description of it. The Bill will lead to statute law that will embrace and embody an historic agreement, which I call the Good Friday agreement, which was so painstakingly constructed line by line over two difficult and demanding years.

However, the tenor of the terms of that agreement took much longer to develop and evolve, to identify the problems that we faced and the solutions that might apply to them, and to establish a consensus on the relationships that must be addressed within the north of Ireland, within Ireland, and within the east and west.

The agreement is soundly founded on the pillars of non-violence, equality of treatment and esteem, full participation by the greatest cross-section of the people's representatives and a sound endorsement by the vast majority of the people of Ireland, north and south.

I hope that the Bill will enable the two communities in Northern Ireland to work in harmony together for the greater good, without the fear of domination or the fear of total victory by one side over the other. It is my hope that, by this working together, we in Northern Ireland can evolve to a normal democratic society that is free of violence, intimidation and sectarianism.

My party, by its strict adherence to only democratic and peaceful methods of political persuasion, has clearly illustrated the utter futility of violence and coercion. My response to the remarks of the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney), who is not in his place, is that the history of my party clearly illustrates its total abhorrence of violence from any quarter. The guarantees that the hon. and learned Gentleman and others have mentioned that are required from my party were fully implemented when it signed the Good Friday agreement, which itself is an eschewing of any attempt to use violence, or the threat of violence, for the pursuance of a political objective. The hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned many events that seemed to prove that certain parties to the agreement were thwarting or violating their commitment to the agreement.

I am not privy to the intimacies and nuances that construct the IRA, but I understand, as an outsider, that many of the bombings and atrocities that have been referred to were conducted by the very people who are trying to bring down the agreement, who call themselves the Continuity IRA or some other such name. As a lay person in that context, I do not accept that there is collusion between the two. There may be, but I can make a judgment only from where I stand.

The coercion and the violence pursued by others have been at great cost to human life, limb and property. It has left us a legacy of great personal tragedies and trauma, which will take many years to assuage. The violence of loyalist and republican paramilitaries was the greatest single hindrance to finding an accommodation between the communities to enable us to move forward.

The coming together in the Assembly of a wide spectrum of political representatives—an executive and administrative Assembly for the people of Northern Ireland, with its north-south and east-west dimensions—is the vehicle by which we can learn to work, to live and to evolve socially and politically together. The struggle towards that consensus has been difficult amid violence, which touched almost every family, and sectarianism, which poisoned nearly every relationship.

It has now been clearly shown that violence in Ireland can achieve nothing in political terms or in respect of political advancement, and that it was an obstacle to agreement. Unfortunately, individuals and small groups will think that there is a future for the use of violence, but we, as a community that is knitting together, can eschew those people and deal with them as we evolve into political maturity.

The acceptance of the validity of divergent political aspirations and the holding of each in equal esteem will enable us to set aside the constitutional debate as the primary matter of our political debate. Although the constitutional aspirations of all will always remain a valid and laudable objective, the way is clear for much more meaningful dialogue about economic development, social care and the evolution of our society into more normal forms of democracy and relationships. The expansion of our horizons beyond the Six Counties to the whole of Ireland through north-south and intergovernmental administerial bodies, and their further expansion to the Council of the Isles and to western Europe, will enable us to progress more comprehensively and cohesively to the development of the new society to which I have referred.

It is important to consider the Good Friday agreement and the Bill not as a solution but as the beginning of a process to address the problems that have dogged us for so long. We in Northern Ireland are being given the opportunity to address our economic and social ills by ourselves and to participate in the broader outreaches of our relationships within the island and with our neighbours.

That new beginning is an opportunity for us all, but it is also a challenge for us all. I hope that those who oppose, find fault with and, indeed, in many ways fear the agreement will give it a fair trial, because it is the will of the people of Northern Ireland, and the will of the people of the Republic of Ireland, that it be given a fair trial.

Many assets and advantages can be obtained through the agreement and working together for the common good of north and south.

The Bill translates as best it can the delicate and intricate agreements of the three relationships in the Good Friday agreement. Many aspects of the Bill require further teasing out and, like other hon. Members, I note the Secretary of State's intention to listen carefully and with a sympathetic ear to what has been said, and to table amendments to the Bill, if that is appropriate and necessary.

Valid concerns have been expressed by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Committee on the Administration of Justice about the human rights clauses of the Bill; they must be listened to, and those fears must be addressed in dealing with the component parts of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Groups dealing with equality of opportunity, gender equality and disability legislation feel threatened by embodiment in the greater umbrella of the Equality Commission. If the Secretary of State, as she hinted at the Dispatch Box in answer to a question, could produce amendments that would ensure that those separate and distinct executive functions of the Equality Commission could be seen to be self-standing, that would go a long way towards addressing those concerns.

My party welcomes the Bill as an expression of many years of labour, endeavour and suffering. Members of my party have been the victims of the violence which we are accused of insidiously or half-heartedly supporting. No other party in the north of Ireland has evolved from a non-violent origin. Those who try, by snide innuendo, to attribute to my party support, tacit or otherwise, for violence do us and the community that we represent a grave injustice.

We have struggled hard over many years in difficult circumstances to keep burning the light of democracy and persuasion which are the only way forward in Ireland. Indeed, we would go so far as to claim that our single-track mindedness has enabled us to persuade people who had taken violence as a way forward to see that it was not in their interests, or the interests of the people whom they were supposed to represent, and that the only way to make progress as a society in Ireland was through the democratic process. I resent being classified as a fellow traveller of violence.

My party will support the Bill. We cannot tonight go into the details of the amendments that we shall table, but I hope that, at the end of the long sittings that we shall have over the next two weeks, the Bill will give full expression to the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland, which were expressed clearly in the referendum, despite what was said to the contrary.

9.11 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I am one of the Northern Ireland Members who voted against the agreement. On the constitutional issues, as a Unionist I support the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland because it is in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of their religion or political affiliation. In social and economic terms, Northern Ireland is better off within the United Kingdom. I was born a British citizen, and I want to remain one.

How does the Bill strengthen my British citizenship? I believe that it weakens my position as a British citizen by placing a question mark over it. Clause 1 provides for a poll to be held, at the whim of the Secretary of State, to determine whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom or join a united Ireland. As the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) said, the only alternative that we are given to remaining within the United Kingdom is to be part of a united Ireland. There are other options that the people of Northern Ireland could pursue, but the Bill contains no provision for the Secretary of State to take those into account. It simply confers on the Secretary of State the right at any time to hold a poll if he or she believes that a majority would vote in favour of a united Ireland. That is significant. Why does a united Ireland appear to be the only alternative to remaining within the United Kingdom? Could it be that this process is designed gradually to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom? That question must be answered.

Many Unionists are wrongly accused of being paranoid about a united Ireland. I do not believe that a united Ireland is feasible from an economic or social perspective. The United Kingdom is a multicultural, multi-ethnic society and can best accommodate the cultural differences and the diversity of identities that exist in Northern Ireland. I do not believe that a united Ireland could ever accommodate that diversity of culture and identity. Based on what I read in the Bill, I believe that there is an agenda on which a united Ireland is the only alternative to remaining part of the United Kingdom. That must be challenged.

I welcome the establishment of an Assembly. Unionists have long strived for that, because we wanted the restoration of proper, local, democratic government on a par with other parts of the United Kingdom, which we have not had in Northern Ireland since 1972. However, I am concerned about the manner of the Assembly. I am afraid that it will be hamstrung by the enormous number of checks and balances that have been built into the system. There is a real danger that the Assembly will get—to use local parlance—bogged down with those checks and balances.

Unfortunately, the degree and extent of those checks and balances militate against the building of trust between the two traditions in Northern Ireland. They build into the system the notion that Unionists and nationalists are distinct and different. The voting strengths in the Assembly will be perpetuated, and the divisions in Northern Ireland will continue in perpetuity because of those checks and balances. Is that the way we should go? Will those checks and balances lead to a healthy, proper democracy in the Assembly?

My most major concern is that people who are linked to terrorist organisations will become Ministers in the government of Northern Ireland. The prospect of the representatives of Sinn Fein-IRA holding ministerial positions in the government of Northern Ireland is an affront to democracy. Sinn Fein-IRA have not wholly embraced the democratic process. They are not fully committed to exclusively peaceful means.

I shall refer to two incidents that occurred at the weekend, when the IRA were supposed to be under a ceasefire. The family of Mr. Andrew Kearney are in no doubt—even if the Secretary of State is—about who murdered him. They say that it was the IRA who murdered him, as does the organisation Families Against Intimidation and Terror, but the Secretary of State has to wait for the evidence. It is a pity that she did not wait for the evidence on the murders of the Quinn family in

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Ballymoney before she and others pointed the finger and demonised the Orange institution. I condemned those murders in the House last week: they were tragic and despicable murders, as was the murder of Mr. Kearney. The political representatives of the IRA, who are accused of murdering Mr. Kearney by his family and by Families Against Intimidation and Terror may soon become Ministers in the government of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Vincent McKenna was assaulted on the Ormeau road. He was prepared, from a republican perspective, to put his head above the parapet and criticise Sinn Fein. His reward was to be beaten up by an IRA gang. The Secretary of State wants evidence. Is Mr. McKenna's evidence not good enough? He says that he recognised some of his assailants as senior members of the IRA. Is that not evidence on which the Secretary of State could base her conclusions about the IRA's commitment to exclusively peaceful means?

The reality is that there is no effective means by which Sinn Fein-IRA will be prevented from taking up a ministerial position in Northern Ireland in a few weeks' time. That is a major deficiency in the Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) said, the Government have failed to provide an effective mechanism to exclude from the holding of office—not just to remove from office—those who have not committed themselves to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. The evidence exists that the IRA is not committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Does my hon. Friend accept that, in the terms of the Bill, if the Unionists were not prepared to vote in cross-community terms, this House—and others—would immediately accuse them of being those who had brought the Bill to an end, rather than the terrorists who have been trying to do that all along?

Mr. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but the test will soon come. The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), who is not present now, said that no one could question the commitment of the SDLP to peaceful means. We shall see. Soon, the SDLP will be required to vote on whether Sinn Fein-IRA should hold ministerial positions. We shall then see whether the SDLP is prepared to demonstrate the fulness of its commitment. In my opinion, Sinn Fein-IRA is not fit to hold government office in Northern Ireland.

The Bill proposes that a north-south ministerial council be established, because that was part of the agreement. The establishment of the council provides for co-operation between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government.

I have some anxieties about the ministerial council. I do not see in the Bill the kind of accountability that we were promised. We were told that the council would be fully accountable to the Northern Ireland assembly, but I do not see that explicitly expressed in the Bill in the way in which I, along with others—including colleagues who are members of the assembly—would like it to be expressed. I think that the Government will have to examine the whole question of accountability.

Many share my fear that Irish nationalists hope to use the north-south ministerial council as a means of creating an all-Ireland dimension that will be about the creation of an all-Ireland Government, through the harmonisation of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic and through the creation of all-Ireland executive bodies. That is what these so-called implementation bodies are: they are all-Ireland executive bodies. They will be given power by this Parliament to exercise power and authority over the whole of the island of Ireland. Those who have said that there are not all-Ireland bodies with executive powers need to read the Bill, and need to understand that there is provision for the creation of all-Ireland bodies with executive powers. I have no doubt that Irish nationalists will want the process to be accelerated to the point at which we have, in effect, an all-Ireland Government.

Clause 68 provides for the Secretary of State to empower the implementation bodies, but one wonders what will happen if the assembly collapses. Will the implementation bodies be disbanded or prorogued, or will they continue to exist? The agreement provides for the assembly and the north-south ministerial council to be totally interdependent—one cannot operate without the other—but what of the implementation bodies? Can the implementation bodies operate if the assembly collapses? We need to know, but the Bill does not spell it out. The real reason for the Assembly and the north-south ministerial council being interdependent is so that Unionists will have to acquiesce in the evolution of an all-Ireland Government if they are to retain their positions in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

I have concerns about the Bill which carry over from my concerns about the agreement. I make it quite clear that my view, which is shared by many of my colleagues, is that, as democrats, we will not countenance the holding of ministerial office in the government of Northern Ireland by those who are linked to terrorist organisations that continue to be responsible for murder and violence on the streets of Northern Ireland. We will not support that, and I hope that the Government will step back, look at the Bill and ensure that terrorists and their political representatives do not become Ministers in Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom.

9.25 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) puts a perfectly legitimate Unionist case for strengthening the United Kingdom, but, with respect, he overlooks profound constitutional change throughout the United Kingdom. The UK has changed, largely as a result of the Scottish referendum decision on 11 September last year and the Welsh referendum. In terms of constitutional reform, this will prove to be a remarkable year in parliamentary history.

I offer my sincere compliments to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to her ministerial colleagues and to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and I gratefully acknowledge the small number of Northern Ireland political representatives who have sought to bring about constitutional reform through peaceable and democratic principles and methods.

The Secretary of State said that the Bill is a constitutional milestone, but that is an understatement. She is aware of my view that the Assembly should be housed in a new building. We in Scotland are to have a new Scottish Parliament which will result from an international architectural competition. I thought that the

model that was presented by a Scots firm should have won the competition, but the Secretary of State for Scotland and his estimable colleagues chose a firm of Spanish architects.

Hon. Members have spoken about a future debate between the United Kingdom and a united Ireland. Perhaps that debate will focus on the issue of federalism versus a united Ireland. In Scotland, the more intelligent elements of the chattering classes are debating federalism versus separatism. Matters are changing dramatically. The Northern Ireland Bill, with the Scottish and Welsh legislation, will have profound intended and unintended consequences. For example, the House will experience considerable change over the next year. I assume that Grand Committees and some Select Committees and Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland questions will disappear. This House will pass no Northern Ireland, Scottish or Welsh legislation and eventually, whether some of us like it or not, as a result of such constitutional reform, we shall have to discuss a reduction in the number of Northern Ireland, Welsh and Scottish Members.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Godman: No. I have waited too long to make a speech of a few minutes. The hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me on this occasion. I usually give way to the charming fellow.

In the years ahead, we shall not be able to duck a debate on such reductions.

I have reservations about a number of clauses. For example, clause 10 states that the Attorney-General for Northern Ireland will refer conflicts between the Northern Ireland Assembly and Westminster to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. When we debated the Scotland Bill, I suggested that there should be a national constitutional court made up of representatives from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. That idea was dismissed, but I still believe that it is worth arguing for.

Clause 27—about which I completely disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay)—allows for vacancies in the Assembly to be filled through by-elections, substitutes or any

"other method . . . as the Secretary of State thinks fit."

I long to see a Northern Ireland Assembly, a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly discussing and legislating on everyday matters. As in other assemblies and Parliaments, vacancies should be filled only through by-elections. I disagree with the idea that substitutes should be found to fill vacancies.

Clause 62—I have made known my views on this—should be extended to include other forms of discrimination. It mentions only religious belief or political opinion, but I believe that that definition must be widened. Part VII deals with the creation of a British-Irish council. Despite what has been said, that council must eventually lead to the demise of the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body.

I think that we are on something of a constitutional helter-skelter, and I am delighted to support the Bill, just as I was to support the Scotland and Government of Wales Bills. I have some reservations, but the United Kingdom will never be the same—and thank heavens for that.

9.31 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I begin by reiterating the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) in congratulating both the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) on their election—or selection—as First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the incipient Assembly.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik)—unfortunately, he is no longer in the Chamber—on his return to the Opposition Benches. He was much missed in Committee considerations of Northern Ireland business, and it is good to see him back more or less in one piece. He said—it may have been a throwaway comment—that he hoped that the Conservatives would participate constructively. The Government have admitted that the Bill was prepared in record time. It is not a Scotland Bill mark II or even a Government of Wales Bill mark II; it is unique, not least because Northern Ireland had a Parliament for almost 50 years. I reiterate the Conservative party's support for the agreement. Conservative Members want the Assembly to work, and to work well, but a rushed Bill will always have defects and difficulties, and the duty of the House is to ensure proper scrutiny, especially when legislation has had to be put together in such a limited time.

Many hon. Members have alluded to the difficulties in the detail. The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh, like other hon. Members, queried clause 66, which deals with the establishment of the north-south ministerial council and the British-Irish council. He questioned whether the wording of the Bill was true to earlier agreed drafts in the talks process leading to the Belfast agreement. The hon. Members for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) and for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) challenged clause 23, which deals with the exclusion of Ministers. They pointed to an interpretation whereby the clause could exclude Ministers only once they were in place, and could not prevent them from taking up their posts at the outset.

Furthermore, we heard from the Secretary of State's own lips—I wrote this down at the time and hope that it is accurate according to *Hansard*—that the Bill was needed, among other things, to fill a number of "practical gaps" in the agreement. I trust that that was not a slip of the tongue, because I agree with those sentiments whole-heartedly. No agreement can hope to cover all the practical aspects of making it work on the ground. Many of them will, by their very nature, be legalistic. They need to be specific, incapable of misinterpretation, and clear to all parties to the agreement. That should be the aim of the House and those of us who have elected to scrutinise the Bill.

We welcome the Secretary of State's admission at the outset that the Bill is not yet finalised and that the Government are open to constructive amendments. I give an assurance from the Opposition Benches that that is our intention. I hope that that reassures the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire.

The relationship that is crucial to the success of the Assembly under strand 1 was referred to by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh; it is the Ulster Unionist-SDLP axis. I have seen it working for many years in Northern Ireland, particularly at local council level. Both sides of

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

the community—nationalist and Unionist—have worked together in community groups and on partnership boards, particularly the one in Londonderry and the one in Belfast, so I have no qualms about believing that the two political parties can work together at the higher level of the new Assembly.

I should think that the objective of all Governments since 1974 has been to end the direct rule that was implemented at that time. I should say that direct rule itself has achieved several things: it has been fair; it has been efficient, in the main; and it has been an effective method of government. I do not agree with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann who referred to bad government and to the running down of the civil service during the period of direct rule.

Of course, there were defects. Much of the legislation was passed by Order in Council, which did not enable local Members of Parliament to have much of a say. Also, Ministers were often not local. Indeed, I was accused of being a carpetbagger when I first arrived in Northern Ireland. Ministers in Northern Ireland have considerable power, but little direct accountability is seen on the ground. There is no local government in Northern Ireland on the level that exists in the rest of the United Kingdom. All this leads to a democratic deficit. It is the aim of the agreement and of the Bill, which seeks to give a legal framework to that agreement, to put right that democratic deficit.

We have tabled some 39 amendments to date, and one new clause. There will no doubt be more. Indeed, many have been promised in this debate. There have been numerous hurdles on the way to a settlement in Northern Ireland, beginning, as many have said today, with the work done by the previous Conservative Government and culminating in the Belfast agreement and the referendum. Each new hurdle seems to loom larger.

We now have the critical responsibility of ensuring that the legal framework on which the successful working of the Northern Ireland Assembly, among other things, will rest, is written in an unambiguous and unequivocal way that is understood and accepted by everyone who is wholly committed to peaceful means and the democratic process. It is indeed a mammoth undertaking, and we need to get it right.

I trust that the Government will realise that those sentiments are what lay behind the Opposition's stance on the Bill. If a constructive approach is being invited, the Government will not find Opposition Members backward in coming forward.

9.39 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): I very much agree with the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss). As he said, in the next fortnight, we will be considering amendments to the Bill, in Committee, on Report, and in the other place.

This Bill is very different in its conception and in the approach taken to it by hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is based squarely on, and incorporates, the agreement. It has been endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland: we hope, therefore, that it incorporates not only the words but the spirit of the agreement.

As events have happened in record time—the agreement was reached in April; the referendum was held in May; elections to the Assembly and its first meeting occurred in June and July—the Bill, which has more than 80 clauses and many schedules, will inevitably have to be amended. The Government will not only have to pass their own amendments: we will have to take into account sensible amendments made by the official Opposition and by hon. Members from other parties, particularly those representing Northern Ireland.

Mr. Mackinlay: And from the Labour party.

Mr. Murphy: At the beginning of this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) raised the issue of by-elections and substitutes. Although I shall return to that issue in Committee, I can tell him now that the House and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agreed that substitutes rather than by-elections represented the proper way of dealing with vacancies, as that system will maintain the Assembly's balance. There may indeed be a case for by-elections—for example, if no substitutes are offered, or if substitutes refuse to take seats—when vacancies have to be filled. By-elections may be held in such cases. We will also have to take into account the Registration of Political Parties Bill. Moreover, paragraph 6 of schedule 14 to the Northern Ireland Bill will ensure that orders that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may have to produce will remain in force after devolution.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) made a very interesting and useful speech. He said that the House should keep a close interest in Northern Ireland—and, of course, we shall. He also raised a matter of concern to himself and the Conservative party—removal and exclusion from ministerial office in Northern Ireland. On Thursday, there will be considerable debate on that matter. However, for now, I shall say simply that the agreement essentially says that the Assembly will decide whether Ministers should be excluded from office. It seems to be clear that that is what both the agreement and the Bill say. Several hon. Members have raised that issue.

We will have to examine the pledge of office—which mentions non-violence—and ways in which the Assembly itself can deal with matters on cross-community votes. We will have also to consider the points that the Prime Minister made in Balmoral, outside Belfast, which are included in the Bill, and, in forming a judgment and informing the Assembly's presiding officer, my right hon. Friend will have to take into account whether she thinks that those matters have been breached. We will have a full-scale debate on those matters on Thursday, when I am sure other points will be made.

I particularly agreed with the right hon. Member for Bracknell when he said that the principle of consent is uppermost in the Bill. At its very start, the Bill refers to the fact that only the majority of the people Northern Ireland, by consent, will decide their fate. It is so important that that principle is mentioned at the very start of the Bill, incorporating the agreement itself.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) made an interesting and important speech in his new capacity as First Minister for Northern Ireland. He made detailed references to the executive powers in the Bill, particularly those in clause 18. I can tell him that they relate only to the prerogative and other powers that are vested in Her Majesty and exercised by the First Minister and his deputy. They may be exercised through the Department, but most ministerial powers are vested in statute and are not affected by the clause. We shall, however, consider the matter further in Committee.

The right hon. Gentleman referred—as did other hon. Members—to clauses 66 to 68 and the relationship between the Assembly and the north-south ministerial council. As he knows, the initial implementation bodies are to be agreed in a shadow north-south ministerial council. They will be established by formal agreement between the two Governments with legislation by order under clause 68. After devolution, the Assembly will have full power to enter into further agreements by virtue of schedule 2(3)(b). Any legislative or financial consequences of such agreements must have the agreement of the Assembly. Ministers are bound by the pledge of office to act in accordance with any decisions of the Executive Committee. No laws can be passed and no money can be spent by the Assembly on matters regarding the affairs of the north-south ministerial council unless the Assembly is in agreement. Again, I am sure that we will consider that in further detail in Committee.

I have sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's point about Orders in Council, as would any democrat. However, there are difficulties regarding business in the House that we have to consider in the next few weeks. Inevitably, the amount of business involving Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will be less than it was before devolution, but we shall have to consider the matter. I know that, for many years, the right hon. Gentleman and others have made the point that Orders in Council, which are unamendable, are not as good as ordinary Bills which have to undergo the full legislative process.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the vexed issue of the Equality Commission, which has raised its head across the Floor of the House today. We shall look particularly at his point regarding the absence of reference to the relationship between the Assembly and the Equality Commission. There may well be a department for equality, but whatever the circumstances, there is a relationship, and it needs to be examined. I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about the one-stop shop. It makes sense for those who are troubled by matters with which the Equality Commission deals—equal opportunities for women, matters concerning disabled people, fair employment or whatever—to be able to consult one umbrella organisation to find out how they are affected as individuals and beyond that.

A number of hon. Members have said that the structures that incorporate the Equality Commission and other bodies should not disappear completely, but I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has found a compromise between an Equality Commission and the other directorates. That is another matter to be considered later.

We shall consider carefully the points made by the right hon. Gentleman in respect of the financial provisions. There is no intention of moving away from the Barnett formula for Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, but we need to examine the matter further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) raised a number of issues. I pay tribute to his work as chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Body. I am sure that no hon. Member can match his condemnation of terrorism. He made a significant speech. We certainly have to consider carefully what happens to the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body once the Assembly has taken on its full powers. I believe that it will have an enhanced role in another capacity, so we shall have to wait to see how it operates.

We are pleased to see the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) back in the House discussing Northern Ireland matters. He was quite right to say that the Bill gives the people of Northern Ireland a golden opportunity to govern themselves.

I agree that we will have the summer months to reflect on possible improvements to the Bill. I should emphasise that, owing to the gap between the consideration of the Bill in this House and in the other place, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, ministerial colleagues and I will have an opportunity to consult political parties, particularly those in Northern Ireland, as well as others represented in the House and other bodies, on where we go on issues of controversy and concern.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) also spoke in a different capacity—as Deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland, for what I suspect was the first time. We all agreed with him when he said that we are entering a new era of trust and agreement. He was right to say that he, and the right hon. Member for Upper Bann, the First Minister, represent the two main traditions in Northern Ireland. He also rightly pointed to their enormous work load over the next few months and weeks. They are charged by the Assembly with producing reports on departmental portfolios and the north-south ministerial council by 14 September.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh highlighted the human and financial cost of the past few weeks. He also made specific reference to clause 66, which has replaced clause 26. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) raised the same issue. I should like to deal with both their points. The north-south ministerial council is to be formally established under the British-Irish agreement by an exchange of notes between the two Governments. The Bill provides the necessary legislative basis for the ministerial council to operate. Schedule 2 confers full powers on the Assembly and Northern Ireland Ministers to enter arrangements and agreement with the Irish Government. The draft clause 26, to which the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh referred, re-enacted section 12 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, but, on further reflection, it was felt that clause 66 more properly reflected the agreement. Indeed, it allows only agreements in the context of the north-south ministerial council.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh was right to point out—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara)—what he thought were several omissions on human rights. The agreement is silent on some aspects of the Human Rights Commission, such as

[Mr. Murphy]

the right to call witnesses in evidence. It is certainly the intention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to consult Northern Ireland parties further during the next two months precisely because the agreement is not clear on the issue.

We all agree entirely with the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh that the civic forum should play a vital role in the new process. I know that he and the right hon. Member for Upper Bann are charged with establishing guidelines on how it should operate.

The hon. Member for North Antrim spoke of the removal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920. It is replaced by clause 1, which accentuates and emphasises the principle of consent. The hon. Gentleman knows that articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution have changed, too. I covered earlier his point about clauses 26 and 66.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North raised the issue of the Equality Commission, to which I have already referred. The Fair Employment Commission and the bodies that represent voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland are very much in favour of an Equality Commission. We believe that the four chief executives of the current commissions can shape the structure of the new commission to such an extent that we can arrive at a sensible compromise. I agree with my hon. Friend on the need to consider clause 79 in the light of the Tinnelly case.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who is Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, made a very useful and important speech. He rightly referred to the financial aspects of the Bill and the need for proper scrutiny of spending, the need to combat fraud and corruption and the need for the House to be able properly to oversee Northern Ireland expenditure. He made comparisons with Scotland and Wales. We have taken considerable note of what he said. He can rest assured that, in Committee and beyond, we shall be taking the matters very seriously into account and will come back to him on them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) welcomed the measures on equality and made a useful comparison with Scotland. She is a great supporter of the political developments in Northern Ireland in recent months.

The hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) referred to my party's 1988 policy document on Northern Ireland. He and I have discussed the issue many times. I suspect that we shall continue to disagree, but I assure him that our policy has changed. My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister were responsible for that change. A glance at the relevant documents shows considerable differences between our policy then and our policy now on issues such as agreement by consent in Northern Ireland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scotland—[HON. MEMBERS: "Kilmarnock and Loudoun."] I was out of the Chamber at the time. I have "My hon. Friend for Des Browne" written here, which is not right either. He made some important points. He asked why clauses 61 and 62 were different. We have had a look at that and we are not quite sure ourselves, so we shall come back to him on the reasons, particularly for the differences between the 1973 Act and clause 61. His points on human rights and equality have been taken into account. He also raised schedule 5 to the Scotland Bill. As for Scotland, broadcasting is reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament, as laid out in paragraph 25 of schedule 3.

The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) made a number of interesting points. We shall take most of them into account. He is right that the Human Rights Commission must look at its budget carefully and spend the money as wisely as possible. Spending on the British-Irish council will be a matter for the two Governments. We do not think that that will require a great deal of money, but legislation will not be necessary. I hope to meet representatives from Jersey, the Isle of Man and Guernsey this week. I am sure that I shall find time in my busy diary to do so, perhaps in their respective islands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) also referred to British-Irish relations. We shall take his points into account. I pay tribute to his long involvement in relations between this country and the Republic of Ireland.

I did not agree with most of what the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) said, but he never expected me to. He will have an opportunity to raise the issues about which he spoke, particularly clause 23, on Thursday.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) made an interesting and passionate speech. I agree that we should give the agreement a fair trial.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) talked about consent. I do not agree with his interpretation of the agreement. The Assembly has checks and balances and we shall consider the issue as we progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) made several useful and important points, as did the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire. We shall deal with those in Committee.

The past two weeks have seen some horrific events in Northern Ireland, with many despairing of the future. However, the will for change is too strong to go back to those conflicts and terrible tensions of the past 30 years. The people in Northern Ireland have voted for a new political landscape. The agreement was based fairly and squarely on an agreement that the parties forged—not the Irish Government or the British Government, but the Northern Ireland political parties. That is the strength of the agreement, allowing communities to work together and laying down sensible co-operation arrangements between both parts of the island and between the two islands, tackling the great issues of human rights and equality.

Above all, the Bill gives back to all the people of Northern Ireland the right to govern themselves, and now in a way that respects both traditions. The Assembly is up and running, and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are in office. We pay tribute to them for the wisdom and leadership that they have shown. They, like us, know that the agreement represents the hope and aspirations of all those in Northern Ireland who yearn for peace and stability for the generations to come.

I unreservedly and enthusiastically commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 322, Noes 9.

Division No. 340] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mallon, Seamus
Maples, John
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Moss, Malcolm
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin

Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Gray, James
Hunter, Andrew
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Rev. Ian Paisley and
Mr. Peter Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Committee of the whole House, pursuant to the Order [17 July].

Committee tomorrow.

NORTHERN IRELAND BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Northern Ireland Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure of the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act;

(b) the charging on, and payment out of, the Consolidated Fund of sums to be paid into the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland;

(c) the issue out of the National Loans Fund of sums required by the Secretary of State for the making of advances to the Department of Finance and Personnel in Northern Ireland;

(d) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Special Grant Report

That the Special Grant Report (No. 36) (HC 823), which was laid before this House on 17th June, be approved.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

That the draft Houses in Multiple Occupation (Charges for Registration Schemes) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 22nd June, be approved.

Special Grant Report (Wales)

That the Special Grant Report (No. 3) (Wales) 1998 (HC 832), which was laid before this House on 25th June, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to the Order [17 July],

Public Health (S.I., 1998, No. 1582)

That the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning) (No. 2) Order 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 1582), dated 29th June 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1st July, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Howard Flight be discharged from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee and Mr. John Randall be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Mudie, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

HEALTH COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Andrew Lansley be discharged from the Health Committee and Mr. David Amess be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Mudie, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Nick Gibb be discharged from the Social Security Committee and Mr. Howard Flight be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Mudie, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Waste Disposal (Essex)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.14 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I am grateful for this opportunity to bring before the House the subject of waste disposal in Essex. I have requested this debate in order to discuss waste disposal in, but not by, Essex. Essex disposes of its waste in its own backyard, but the problems experienced in my constituency are caused largely by other counties disposing of their waste in Essex. I believe that they should process it in their own backyards.

My constituency is situated in the south-east corner of Essex. It is the most heavily populated part of the county, and is situated on the north side of the Thames roughly 30 miles from London. It faces across the river to Kent. It is very close to the Dartford crossing, which is part of the M25 ring road and one of the most heavily trafficked areas in the country. For centuries, gravel and sand has been extracted from the river bed along the Thames estuary. That has left many large holes in the ground that are used mostly as landfill sites—although the Lakeside shopping centre is situated in one of them. That shopping centre has parking spaces for 12,000 cars, so one can appreciate the size of the hole.

There is a large waste fill site in Pitsea in my constituency. Others are located in the constituency represented by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who is in his place, and in the delightfully named Mucking flats. Mucking flats is actually in the constituency of Basildon, but it used to be in my constituency, and, because it has such a wonderful name, I have become particularly fond of it, and often mention it in the House.

My main concern is that the county of Kent, which is perfectly able to dispose of its own rubbish, has refused to open and use new landfill sites. It has twice refused to install incinerators in the county, and has chosen instead to move more rubbish across the Dartford crossing and deposit it in landfill sites in Essex. It already exports half a million tonnes of waste a year to Essex, and its present proposals would double that quantity.

As a result, there would be an additional 200 heavy goods vehicle movements a day on the Dartford crossing. If one adds up those movements during a year, one sees how much traffic that decision would generate in my constituency and in that of the hon. Member for Thurrock. By 2010, Kent will have no more landfill space, so it will want to export an additional 1.5 million tonnes of waste to surrounding counties.

Most of that rubbish could be processed easily within Kent—if not by landfill then by incineration, as I shall explain later. One can imagine the effect that large numbers of lorries would have on my county, which is already heavily industrialised. Shell Haven is located in Essex, and there are many oil transporter movements. Tilbury docks is situated nearby, and large container lorries move backwards and forwards in the area. We could well do without the extra traffic.

A proposal for a waste from energy incinerator in the Erith and Crayford area of Kent was turned down by Kent county council on the ground that the facility was not needed. That means that the waste will be transported across the river and dumped in my part of the world. Brian Griffiths, the director of Biffa waste—a major waste servicing company—said:

> "It is not acceptable that Essex should have to bear the cost of Kent's failure to provide for landfill. This is part of a dangerous trend for waste problems to be shunted from one community to another."

The next problem we have is London, which produces 8 million tonnes of domestic and commercial waste every year. Most of that goes to surrounding counties, including Bedfordshire, but a great deal of it comes down the road into my part of Essex. Over 17,000 tonnes of it is transported by river, which is the sensible way to send it, to Mucking flats, where it is used for landfill. At least that keeps it off the road, but that is only a small part—about 20 per cent.—of the rubbish from London, because 80 per cent. comes by road and generates about 1,000 heavy goods vehicle movements in and around the London area each week.

If that is multiplied by the amount of rubbish coming from Kent, the number of extra vehicles on the roads becomes clear. If the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions really wants to tackle the problem of overuse of the roads, he can well start by dealing with the rubbish that is being moved from one county to another when it could easily be dealt with in the counties that produce the rubbish.

As a result of this transfer of rubbish, anyone travelling along the A13 or A127—the major roads into my constituency—will see in the hedgerows plastic bags, which are blown out of heavy goods vehicles, many of them uncovered, as they return to Kent or London. The wind gets into the back of the lorry and whips up bags that have been stuck in the vehicle. As a result, black bags adorn the verges. We have some of the filthiest verges in the country, and we are not proud of that. One of my constituents said to me recently, "I am ashamed to invite friends to visit me in Essex because of the filthy state of the roadsides." I understand exactly what she means. The heavy goods vehicles leave a trail of plastic bags that we can do without.

London is one of the main culprits in depositing its waste in other people's backyards. Essex county council will not tolerate this for ever. In fact, it is to stop other counties bringing their waste into Essex by 2011, which is not so very many years away. Essex will look after its own problems, but it will not be taking in rubbish from elsewhere, for which it does not have room.

The opportunities for dealing with rubbish within the county that produces it are well discussed. The opportunities are either recycling, which is very fashionable, or composting, which may help with some domestic waste. In Essex, one can obtain a free composting bin. It is handed out gratis from the county council. I suppose that the bin is put outside one's back door and the kitchen waste is shoved into it. However, only a tiny and trivial amount of the rubbish can be dealt with in that way.

There is the fashionable attitude that a great deal of rubbish can be recycled. Essex is very good at providing sites, and there are 23 major recycling sites in the county. I have been to see those involved in recycling, and I have spoken to the people employed at the recycling sites. Although official figures tell us that 40 per cent. of

[Mrs. Teresa Gorman]

rubbish is recyclable, those at the sites tell me that, in truth, only about 20 per cent. of it ends up in the recycling process.

For example, there is no market for waste paper. It is too expensive to recycle it all by extracting the dyes and reusing it. Although people spend time in their cars travelling to recycling sites to dump waste paper, it ends up in landfill sites in the end. They might as well have put it in the dustbin. Apparently, plastic bottles cannot be recycled because there are many different kinds of plastic and it is too expensive to sort them. As a result, they end up in a landfill site.

Although we do our best in Essex to recycle rubbish, that is not the answer. It is an environmentally friendly approach, but it is not the solution.

Richard Sandbrook is a veteran "green", and was once a director of, or some prominent official in, I think, Friends of the Earth. He is now the director of the London-based independent research group, the International Institute for Environment and Development—goodness gracious me, what a title. He wrote an article recently that appeared in the *New Scientist*. It reads:

"Much thinking on recycling is fundamentally flawed because environmentalists refuse to countenance any argument that undermines their sacred cow."

Richard Sandbrook says that

"truck movements transporting recyclables"

and domestic waste and the car journeys of individual households going to and from the recycling site emit large amounts of the very substances which most people who object to incineration object to—carbon dioxide and all sorts of other bits and pieces. According to his research, they generate as much pollution as anything that is done to incinerate rubbish.

Another gentleman, Matthew Leach, who is an energy policy analyst and a lecturer in environmental technology at Imperial college, wrote a good article in *New Scientist* in November. He said:

"In terms of fossil fuel used to supply one tonne of paper in the UK, virgin paper accounts for roughly half as much energy as recycled paper."

Both pieces of research undermine the idea that recycling is the answer to all our prayers.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): The previous Conservative Government had national targets for recycled materials. Will the hon. Lady accept from me that collecting recyclable materials from the doorstep, as the council does in Colchester, is the way forward, and that we must recycle more materials? I was with her 100 per cent. when she criticised London and Kent, but I am parting company with her now.

Mrs. Gorman: The hon. Gentleman restates the common perception that recycling can solve this problem, but experts are telling us that it cannot, and that it is a bit of a dream that we can recycle everything. The usual target is 40 per cent., so, by definition, 60 per cent. is not recycled. When we come down to it, only about 20 per cent. is recycled. I had that from the environmental officer in charge of recycling for Essex county council, and I am giving hon. Members his words, not mine.

Incineration is the bugbear. The two incineration plants in London cause no problems in their locality. The plant in Deptford has some of the latest technology, which was installed in 1994, and has no more effect on the community than would an ordinary factory with a chimney. It does not cause great trouble for the local people, there is not a "not in my backyard" attitude towards it, and it produces a genuinely useful product.

The plant caters for Lewisham, Greenwich and other parts of south-east London; material comes from the streets nearby, so long-distance travel is not involved, and it produces electricity and heat energy. The waste product from the incineration is recycled—metals are extracted—and the ash that is left is used in building blocks, which are used for insulating houses, in tarmacking roads or for forming layers in landfill sites so that raw waste is bedded down.

That is an environmentally friendly and useful way of carrying on. There are about 10 of those plants in the country—for example, in Nottingham, Middlesbrough, Dudley and the Tildasley area of Birmingham. There are also several in Sheffield. The technology has been developed in France, where it is extremely widely used by a company called Vivende. Its British offshoot is the south-east London combined heat and power consortium.

The process is tried and tested, and the recycling unit is not a vast factory with a horrible chimney. Although I have never decided to do it, I am assured that a person could sit on the top of the chimney, breathe what comes out and not be damaged. I do not know whether one would last long enough to come down and tell the world about it.

The main problem that people raise is that of dioxins. Those are chemical substances which, allegedly, are not filtered out. In a paper on dioxins and incineration, a leading authority, Professor Andrew Porteous of the Open university, says:

"The risk from living near an incinerator is put at 7 in 10 million, something akin to being struck by lightning."

He says that the dioxin release is extremely low—he gives the figure in nanograms, which most of us would not understand. To put it in context, he says that it is the equivalent of throwing a quarter of a sugar cube into Loch Ness. He obviously means to imply that an extremely small risk is involved, once the mechanism for recycling in modern units is understood.

The Government must balance the demand of the environmental lobbyists, with the best will in the world—Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace—against the damage that is done by carting rubbish all over the country, in terms not just of the filthy exhaust fumes produced by the lorries, but the fact that they clutter up the roads. The environmentalists cannot have it both ways. If they are against the amount of traffic on the roads, they should welcome incineration and dealing with rubbish on site.

My constituents are fed up to the back teeth with juggernauts trundling down country lanes on their way to landfill sites. They no longer want to tolerate that. In 10 or 12 years' time, we will not tolerate it. By that time, both London and Kent will have to deal with the problem in their own back yards.

10.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I shall be brief, because the Minister wants to reply to the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) for

allowing me to speak in her debate. She has mentioned many places in my constituency, so it is incumbent on me to make some comments.

First, I wholly agree with the hon. Lady about the need to stop the importation of waste into the county borough of Thurrock and the county of Essex from other areas. It is intolerable. My constituency is like a moonscape, having been exploited over many, many decades, and it is time that the exploitation of that part of Essex stopped.

Secondly, although I sign up to the Government's strategy for the Thames gateway, I have some reservations. If the Thames corridor to be built up, it is legitimate to ask where all the human and household waste will go. The Thames gateway strategy must not be considered in isolation.

My third point is on incineration. The benefits of exploiting new technologies are not incompatible with the need for a recycling strategy. The two are inextricably linked and complementary.

I realise that those on the Treasury Bench are anxious about the raising of matters in my constituency, so my final point is that the Government have an opportunity to have strong green credentials if they make the tipping of waste—landfill—very expensive, as other European countries have, and knock back the rapacious appetite of the aggregates industry, which wants to dig holes and exploit minerals, particularly in the south of Essex. That area has been exploited intolerably for too many decades.

I hope that the Minister will feel able to say that the Government are prepared to say no to the exploitation of my part of Essex, to outline a bold recycling strategy, to use technologies to minimise waste, and to stop the importation of waste from other local authority areas that do not meet their obligations.

10.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): I have only about nine minutes to try to deal with these complex questions.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) on securing the debate. She clearly believes in slaughtering sacred cows: she did so on global warming the other day, and she is doing it again on recycling. I do not accept her pessimistic view that 20 per cent. is the maximum that can be attained by recycling. I have visited places where much higher levels are achieved. We must decide what is the best environmental option.

I have considerable empathy with the issues that the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) have outlined. Essex faces a problem that is common to the south-east of England. Existing landfills, on which the area is heavily reliant, are filling up quickly, suitable new sites are in short supply, and the large landfill site at Mucking will reach the end of its planned life by the end of 2001. That has a significant effect on established patterns of waste disposal.

Established patterns of waste disposal will be affected by the changes identified in our strategy document "Less Waste; More Value". One such change is the landfill directive, which we are currently negotiating with our European partners. It has two main thrusts. In addition to its welcome regulatory aspects, which should ensure a high standard of landfill engineering and management across the European Union, it will set progressively diminishing limits on the landfill of biodegradable municipal waste, down to a maximum of 35 per cent. of the total amount of such waste produced in 1995 by the end of 2020.

Perhaps that is a European directive which the hon. Lady can support. It will ensure that we consider other ways of disposing of waste. Essex has a particular problem because of its closeness to London, where many tonnes of waste are produced.

Those measures will require developments in the treating of wastes by reduction at source, recycling, composting or incineration with energy recovery, which are all in the waste disposal hierarchy. We must plan for the introduction of new technologies and new infrastructures, which will enable us to make progress in meeting what are likely to be stringent targets under European Union directives.

I appreciate the hon. Lady's concerns about the planning advice issued by the London planning advisory committee on waste management and its possible impact on Essex. I stress that that is not a Government proposal, and that its status is advisory. The hon. Lady will know that the plan, on which there have been consultations, proposes a moratorium on the building of new incinerators. It also suggests a high level of recycling—40 per cent. for London's waste, whereas currently only about 8 per cent. is recycled. The plan is very ambitious, and it still has to be discussed by the London boroughs and the outlying areas.

We are considering the advice of the London planning advisory committee, and we shall respond in detail shortly. We have no fundamental difficulty with the aim of the guidance to minimise the amount of waste produced and to increase recycling, but we share the concerns to which the hon. Lady alluded and which have been expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) and for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) about how the proposed ambitious recycling targets, which form the basis of the advice, will be met, and, crucially, what will happen if they are not met.

The London planning advisory committee has proposed a moratorium on all but small capacity incineration. The Government believe that high levels of energy from waste and recycling are compatible, and that they each have their place in the hierarchy of waste disposal. It should be possible for local authorities and other waste producers to ensure that their contracts with energy-from-waste plants allow for successful waste minimisation strategies.

I visited SELCHP, and was impressed by the way in which the project was brought to fruition and the local community was brought on board—a member of the local community sits on the board. It has made a good start, and it is not worried or upset by the idea that London boroughs may be able to achieve high levels of recycling. It believes that that is compatible with its process of incinerating whatever cannot be recycled.

However, as the hon. Lady said, we must consider the environmental effects of all the lorries that trundle around London taking waste to incinerators or landfill tips. I suspect that we must also consider the fact that the River Thames flows to the sea in order to establish what best use can be made of it. At present, waste

[Angela Eagle]

flows down the Thames on barges to the Mucking landfill site—although that will stop when the site is filled up.

I recognise Essex county council's concern that London should take responsibility for a greater proportion for its waste, and the need to move away from its current reliance on landfill. I do not think that anyone would argue with that analysis; it is simply a question of how we get there from where we are now in the time available, and that will obviously take time. We are concerned about the development of an integrated strategic approach to waste management in the capital, given the split into 33 London boroughs that was introduced by the last Administration. That fractured the planning, and made it much more difficult for issues of this kind to be dealt with on a strategic basis.

The creation of the Greater London authority is designed to tackle a fragmented and confusing picture. First and foremost, London needs a proper municipal waste strategy, which the new mayor for London will be required to produce. The mayor will be required to develop an integrated municipal waste management strategy for London. In drawing up the plan, he or she will need to have regard to the principles of sustainable development, and the best practicable environmental option.

Such an option must take account of the fact that lorries may be carrying waste around, and of other strategies involving transport, air quality and economic development. He or she will have to consult all bodies affected, including authorities such as Essex and others surrounding London. The mayor will have to take account of the national waste strategy, and the boroughs' waste recycling plans; he or she will also have the power of direction over any non-compliant boroughs. In short, counties such as Essex will be consulted by the mayor as proposals are developed.

In the meantime, I remain concerned that decisions should not be made that close down options for the Greater London authority. There are two concerns. First, the final waste plans of neighbouring areas such as Essex must recognise a continuing need for some landfill outside the capital for treated waste. The GLA will obviously need sufficient time to consider the issue, and to develop its own waste strategy. We would be interested to hear from Essex county council what flexibility there is in its future plans to assist that.

Secondly, we want proper consideration of the issue of river-borne waste transfer. The Thames currently provides an important route for the transport of the capital's waste, keeping some 500 heavy lorry movements a day off London's congested streets. The Government would like to get even more waste off the roads.

"Less Waste; More Value" makes it clear that we are concerned about the risk of increased waste transport. Local authorities should think carefully about the full range of the implications of their decisions on waste—not just the cost and not just the direct impact of waste disposal on the environment, but factors such as emissions resulting from the transport of waste.

I understand that the hon. Member for Billericay and the other Essex Members have been invited by the county council to a briefing meeting on waste issues in Essex, to be held in two days' time. The meeting is designed to discuss the issues raised tonight: the Essex waste plan, the county council's responsibilities and strategies for managing household waste—including increasing recycling and composting—and the continuation of options for limiting future waste imports into Essex from areas such as London and Kent. I urge the hon. Lady to use that occasion to make clear her thoughts on the issue to those responsible for waste management in Essex, as she has made her thoughts clear to the House tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 21 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF EDINBURGH (GUIDED BUSWAYS) ORDER CONFIRMATION BILL

Considered; to be read the Third time.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Lockerbie

1. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): Pursuant to his answer of 6 July—*Official Report, Scottish Grand Committee*, 6 July 1998; c. 6—what assessment he made of the implications of his description of the Libyan suspects in respect of the Lockerbie bombing as the perpetrators of that bombing for the conduct of any court proceedings in Scotland. [49914]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): On 10 July, I wrote to my hon. Friend explaining that that was merely a slip of the tongue on my part in failing to refer to the two Libyan accused as the "alleged perpetrators". The Government are committed to a fair trial for the two Libyan suspects.

Mr. Dalyell: I have no supplementary question as I have an Adjournment debate on the subject tonight.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): Can the Minister comment on today's reports that the Government are about to change their policy on the locus of any trial? As a lawyer, I have reservations about such a precedent, but does he agree that it is in the interests of the victims' families that the accused should be brought to trial and that that may overcome concern about where that trial should be held?

Mr. McLeish: We are dealing with an act of mass murder. The Government are determined to bring those responsible to justice, and that has always been our objective. It remains our view that a Scottish or a United States court is the place for the trial. We do not accept criticism of the Scottish judicial system and its procedures, in which we have every confidence. However, we are willing to explore any option that will bring justice for the families, and discussions on such options have taken place from time to time.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): May I ask for clarification of that answer? Is today's story in *The Guardian* true? Have the Foreign Secretary and the American Secretary of State discussed the matter, and is a statement forthcoming shortly? If so, when will the Lord Advocate—the independent prosecutor—make a statement in the House of Lords, to which he is responsible, as he promised to do on 25 June?

Mr. McLeish: It is no secret that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in close contact with his American counterpart on issues of mutual interest, of which Lockerbie is a major one. Options are always being explored, and nothing has ever been ruled out. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not wish me to speculate on this morning's press comment.

Dr. Fox: Given the Government's record of leaking and speculating to the press before coming to the House, we have an absolute right to know that the Government are not considering a change of policy. I asked the Minister a simple question. Is the essence of the story in *The Guardian* this morning true, or is it not true?

Mr. McLeish: The House will accept that this is a serious issue. Let me repeat that discussions have taken place—and are taking place—about important subjects, of which this is one. No prudent Government would wish to rule out any option. We are dealing with an act of mass murder, and we owe it to the families to bring those responsible to justice. That is our key objective, and I hope that the House can unite around it. It would be foolish to speculate on press comment. All options are being considered, and the House should have confidence in my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who will do his best for the families and for justice.

Dr. Fox: As we approach the summer recess, is it reasonable to assume that there will be no change in policy while hon. Members will be unable to ask appropriate questions of Ministers? Will the Minister continue to defend the principle—defended by the Government and their predecessors—that there will be no caving in to political expediency? We must not open up the possibility of years of litigation in a foreign court rather than the achievement of the swift resolution of the Lockerbie case that the relatives, Members of the House and the people of Scotland all want.

Mr. McLeish: The hon. Gentleman is simply not listening. I said in my opening comments that our view remains that a Scottish or United States court is the place for this trial. We do not accept criticisms of the system, and we continue to have every confidence in the Scottish judicial system and procedures.

Prison Suicides

2. **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): What action he is taking to reduce the number of prison suicides. [49915]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): A revised suicide management strategy was introduced in all Scottish prisons last month and is being underpinned by an injection of some £1 million to improve the supervision of at-risk prisoners. A special task force will look in detail at the deaths that have occurred this year to consider what factors were involved and whether lessons may be learned.

Sir Robert Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer. He answered much of my question 12 days ago, after it was tabled but before he could reply in the House. Does he recognise that, in the long term, we must tackle prison overcrowding and the pressures and problems that it creates? In the spirit of what the Secretary of State said in the Scottish Grand Committee about setting targets by which the Government feel they should be judged, does the Minister have any targets by which the House can judge the Government's performance on delivering prison reform?

Mr. McLeish: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's continuing interest in home affairs. We have a suicide prevention strategy in place in Scotland, but we are keen to underpin it with improvements in staffing and medical facilities. We are creating a further residential care unit in Barlinnie prison. Overcrowding is a problem and means that we cannot spend enough time with individual prisoners. That is why there will be further reforms in the Prison Service to overcome the problem. We are also pursuing a radical programme of alternatives to custody to provide appropriate alternatives for sheriffs in every court in the country. Properly used, they will provide more appropriate care, treatment and punishment while easing the burden of overcrowding in prisons which is having a detrimental effect on our ability to tackle suicide and drugs.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I welcome this initiative. I need hardly remind my hon. Friend that several suicides have taken place at Greenock prison. May I impress on him the need for careful assessment during the admission phase, particularly for remand prisoners? In Greenock, most of those who committed suicide were remand prisoners. Assessment of new prisoners should be carried out carefully and in a controlled way.

Mr. McLeish: There is a problem with risk assessment when prisoners enter prison. For example, Barlinnie turns around 200 prisoners on a Monday. That is an enormous problem. Investment is being put into prisons to ensure modern medical assessment of the risks. I am concerned that, over the past few months, there have been a tremendous number of suicides at Corton Vale, Barlinnie, Greenock and Longriggend. The Government are taking decisive action to try to tackle that problem. There can never be a guarantee that we can exclude suicide or people harming themselves in prisons, but we have an ambitious programme. I sincerely hope that what we are doing will work.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): What is the number of suicides per head of the prison population in Scottish prisons compared with that in England and Wales? Is it higher or lower? Can the Minister explain the reasons for the difference?

Mr. McLeish: The figure is much higher. It is one of the problems and it has reinforced our resolve to tackle this issue with determination. Suicide is a complex issue which causes despair to staff and families. We are keen to try to analyse what is happening, but there is a higher incidence of suicide in prisons in Scotland than in England. That is not in itself a reason for being interested in doing something about it, but it shows that we have much to do in Scotland. We are putting in place the proper procedures. They need time to work. I assure the hon. Lady that we are doing everything possible to make it possible to reduce the number of suicides and to give prisons the confidence to start dealing with prisoners as they should.

Child Care Strategy

3. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): What progress has been made in the provision of nursery and pre–school places under the child care strategy. [49916]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): We have already achieved a major expansion in pre-school education places and are on target to achieve universal provision by this winter. Following the comprehensive spending review, we will invest an extra £229 million over the period 1999-2002 in pre-school education and child care, leading to further substantial growth in places.

Mrs. Fyfe: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and for the announcement of such generous extra provision for pre-school care. My question may seem superfluous in the light of this morning's useful debate in the Scottish Grand Committee, but will he add to his reply by saying what help will be given to voluntary bodies that have had their pre-school provision stopped, or are about to have it stopped, because of the end of urban aid or other funding?

Mr. Galbraith: I recognise the considerable amount of work that my hon. Friend has put in and the effort that she has expended in propagating this policy. I am very pleased that we have been able to deliver for her.

This year, we have allocated an extra £4.8 million to local authorities, and the majority of those funds will be used for stabilisation and the provision of extra places. That is how we have tackled the problem of underfunding. In the next three years, we shall spend an additional £48 million to deal with those specific problems. We have not only a child care strategy for Scotland but the money to underpin it—and that has been delivered by a Labour Government.

Dounreay

4. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What representations he has received regarding the proposed decommissioning of the Dounreay reprocessing plant. [49917]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): Operational matters, including the decommissioning of facilities at Dounreay, are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. None the less, I receive a wide range of correspondence relating to Dounreay. This has included suggestions that there should be a moratorium on new reprocessing contracts.

Mr. Swayne: What assessment has the Secretary of State made with the President of the Board of Trade of the possibility of reducing or halting operations at Sellafield? What radioactive material might be transferred to Dounreay and what measures would the Secretary of State put in place to deal with it?

Mr. Dewar: I thank the hon. Gentleman for extending my remit and area of responsibility—it begins to sound almost like an empire. I am not responsible for Sellafield and I would not want to trespass on my right hon. Friend's responsibilities. Dounreay is interesting enough in itself.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his work putting the Walker report on health and safety at Dounreay into the public domain so that much of the scaremongering and nonsense being spoken about the place could be put into proper context? My colleagues on the Trade and Industry Committee visited Dounreay last month. I thank the Secretary of State on their behalf, but remind him that a great deal of work remains to be done at Dounreay. That work is necessary for Britain's nuclear safety, and I hope that he will continue to give it every encouragement.

Mr. Dewar: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I congratulate him and his Committee on the tenacious way in which they have investigated the difficulties that have occurred at Dounreay. As he said, the Health and Safety Executive-nuclear installations inspectorate report is a document of some importance and the focus of considerable speculation. I first became aware of it on 11 June and it was published on 15 June. Even when talking about the past and things that happened many years ago, it is important that the Government are open about such matters and put all available information in the public domain.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Can the Secretary of State explain why he became aware of that report so late in the day? Why was it not made known to Ministers before the debate, as considerable controversy surrounded the issue? If the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, as reported in the press, wishes to apply for a so-called super pit at Dounreay for low-level nuclear waste, will that proposal have to go to a full planning inquiry, given that the present planning permission was based on a pit that is subject to erosion? In view of concerns about waste disposal at Dounreay—which has involved explosions and contamination—does the Secretary of State agree that a full-scale planning inquiry is needed for such an application?

Mr. Dewar: These are important and sensitive matters. I understand that the NII report went straight to the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, and I regret that it was not available earlier. The Department of Trade and Industry is very much involved in the process and is taking up the matter with the UKAEA.

I have seen some press reports about an expansion of storage pits at Dounreay. I know that the nationalist party is very keen to inhibit and stop reprocessing of even the waste material on the site, so long-term storage becomes a particular problem for it. I shall have to take some advice about what exactly is intended as that will affect the appropriateness of any planning inquiry in which the hon. Gentleman is interested. I am certainly prepared to make some inquiries. If there is a firm plan—I am not aware of one—I shall address the hon. Gentleman's point by correspondence.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): In common with many hon. Members on both sides of the House, I am a long-term admirer of the Secretary of State's ethereal wit, but will he descend for a moment to the mundane and answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne)? If, by the action of the President of the Board of Trade, Sellafield's operations are curtailed or cease altogether, will he guarantee that material from Sellafield will not be classed as non-commercial and transferred to Dounreay?

Mr. Dewar: I genuinely welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Scottish family; we talk about a multicultural society in Scotland so, although this is really straining tolerance, I am prepared to do it. The foundation on which he bases his question is too hypothetical for me to attempt to answer it. I am not aware of any plans to close Sellafield: that would indeed be a major undertaking and significant in terms of strategic approach, so, self-evidently, the knock-on effects would have to be carefully considered. The hon. Gentleman is building on insubstantial grounds when he makes such suggestions.

Higher Education

5. **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): If he will make a statement on the percentage of students currently attending Scottish universities from *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* England, Wales and Northern Ireland and *(c)* parts of the EU outside the United Kingdom. [49918]

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): From the latest data available, approximately 71 per cent. of students attending Scottish higher education institutions are from Scotland; approximately 16 per cent. are from England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and approximately 4 per cent. are from other parts of the European Union.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the Minister for that helpful answer. I am sure that he is aware that the Government's climbdown on the matter of charging different fees to students from different parts of the United Kingdom attending Scottish universities has been widely welcomed, and not only by the Opposition. What advice has he received about whether the Scottish Parliament will have the power to make it illegal to charge students from England, who attend Scottish universities, and students from Scotland, who attend Scottish universities, different fees?

Mr. Wilson: Given the Opposition's rather desperate plight, I understand that they have to claim triumphs

where none exist, but I assure the hon. Lady that we welcome the fact that the Lords eventually agreed with us. The offer to monitor the operation of all the changes was on the table from the outset and I have absolutely no problem with formalising it. Incidentally, I am delighted to learn that applications from England to St. Andrews university, which had some lobbying influence in these matters, are up, not down, on last year. Hon. Members on both sides of the House might wonder whether the time of the House was not wasted just a little bit on that. The answer to the hon. Lady's question is that all these matters will become the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that the decision on tuition fees gives all universities in Scotland the task of trying to increase the number of young people from Scotland who attend them and to extend the range of opportunity available to people whom the universities might not, in the past, have tried to attract into university education?

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. While we were wasting time on the diversion of whether applications from England to St. Andrews would go up or down by a couple of dozen, the reality of what the Government were doing elsewhere was far more important. We have been encouraging and putting real resources into encouraging wider access to Scottish universities and we have been very successful in that. I might add that I am particularly proud of the fact that in Scotland, and in Scotland alone, we have now abolished tuition fees for part-time students with low incomes. I understand that that is of absolutely no interest to the Opposition or to the House of Lords, but it is a very substantial achievement by the Government.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): May I offer my condolences to the Minister on having taken flak over a blatantly unfair policy and express the hope that that does not lead to his leaving the Scottish Office in too much of a hurry? Will he join me in condemning his ministerial colleagues who have failed to provide funds for fourth-year tuition fees for students in Scotland and have left him in an untenable position by accepting the need for a review?

Mr. Wilson: I am pleased to note that the hon. Gentleman's wit is as razor sharp as ever.

One of the useful by-products of the debate was the securing of the first nationalist spending commitment since the wiping of the website. I must say that I am astonished by the commitment that the hon. Gentleman gave, on behalf of his party, to a Scottish Parliament's paying the £2 million for the students in question. The Scottish nationalists actually think that we should spend more of the Scottish budget on supporting students from outside Scotland than the £65 million net that we spend now. That is extraordinary—but it is a commitment that the hon. Gentleman has made and with which he will have to live.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): May I take up the question of the social origins of students at higher and further education establishments? Do the Government intend to set targets for such institutions and direct them towards increasing the number of students they recruit from sections of society that are currently grossly under-represented?

Mr. Wilson: The reality—about which I am deeply concerned—is that only 11 per cent. of school leavers from the lower-income social groups go into higher education compared with more than 80 per cent. from the higher-income groups. The Government are not prepared to tolerate such an inequality of opportunity and fulfilment of aspirations, which has lasted far too long.

We have given the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council a directive to promote wider access as one of its objectives. We have put money into that and, as I have said, we have taken a major step through the abolition of tuition fees for part-time students from lower-income backgrounds. We will continue to pursue those policies. Until there are equal opportunities for everyone in every corner of Scotland, irrespective of economic and social background, we shall not have genuine equality in society. That is the objective that we are pursuing, and we will not be diverted from it by side issues.

School Development

6. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce** (Gordon): If he will make a statement on the level of capital consent for school development which he plans to approve for rural north-east Scotland in the years 1999 to 2002. [49919]

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has just announced, in the comprehensive spending review, additional capital expenditure plans of £185 million for schools over the period 1999 to 2002. The distribution to individual authorities will be considered over the coming months.

Mr. Bruce: May I take it from that that the Government will be able to give a positive response to applications from Aberdeenshire council for approval for private finance initiative projects and new capital projects for schools in the area—for example, the PFI project involving Garioch academy, linked to Banff primary school, and the new primary school for Kintore? When nearly every secondary school in Aberdeenshire has temporary classrooms, a positive response is required. Will the Minister be able to give such a response in the near future?

Mr. Wilson: What the Minister, and the Government, can do is give a substantial additional amount of cash to Aberdeenshire council and every other local authority over the next few years so that they can make their own decisions within the relevant parameters.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, I visited Ellon academy, and I am aware of the problems there. I am also aware of the £200 million backlog in school maintenance that we inherited all over Scotland. When the allocations are made, that will be one avenue that each authority will be able to pursue in making its own capital investment decisions for education. The other, of course, is the PFI. Aberdeenshire, very properly, has presented proposals for both schools the hon. Gentleman mentioned, which will be considered alongside the other applications for

PFI projects that are coming in from all over Scotland. I am well aware of the needs of that part of the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but two avenues are available.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): The Minister will know from correspondence that we have exchanged of my concern about the condition of one of the secondary schools in my constituency. I am especially concerned about the condition of Breadalbane academy in Aberfeldy, which could just about be described as the north-east of Scotland. The report carried out on the school's fabric by Her Majesty's inspectorate of schools defined the fabric as good, but, having visited the school, I can assure the Minister that it is far from adequate for the needs of the growing population in the area. What consideration will he be able to give to the specific need to improve the quality of that and other schools in Perth and Kinross, where there is a rapidly expanding school population?

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman will be relieved to learn that Breadalbane academy is situated in middle Scotland rather than north-east Scotland. The problems of the academy have been brought to my attention by the hon. Gentleman, and I can only give him the same answer as I gave the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce). However, the sums of money available to education authorities over the next three years, not only through the most recent allocation but through windfall tax money announced last year, are beyond the dreams of what seemed possible a little more than a year ago. Every education authority will now be able to make funding decisions based on the allocations that will be issued shortly. I should think it very likely that the hon. Gentleman's local authority will give high priority to the undoubted needs of Breadalbane academy.

Petrol Stations

7. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If he will make a statement on the number of petrol stations serving rural communities of 3,000 or fewer which have closed in the last 12 months. [49920]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): We do not have precise figures, but the report "Petrol Stations in Rural Scotland" estimates a closure rate of petrol stations in rural Scotland of 3 per cent. a year over the past eight years.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is the Minister aware that the road fuel tax regime put in place by the Government in the Budget will increase petrol and diesel prices next year by a staggering 25p a gallon? Will this not lead to further closures of petrol stations in the remote rural areas, to the loss of vitally needed jobs in the rural areas, to misery for those dependent on their car in rural areas and to an increase in freight costs in rural areas? In short, is it not only the Conservatives who can represent those in rural areas in Scotland or in the Cotswolds?

Mr. McLeish: That may represent a picture of rural England, but it does not reflect life in rural Scotland. Of course the Government are concerned about the sustainability of rural life. It is all right for the nationalists to make noises from a sedentary position, but the important issue is that car dependency is very high in rural communities. It is not the Government's desire to undermine that in any particular way. There must be a network of rural petrol filling stations to serve local needs. Instead of the ideological position that has been proposed, we are trying to help in hard, practical terms.

Rate relief is available from April 1998 for small businesses, including petrol filling stations. There are derogations on petrol vapour recovery directives to help with capital investment. A new rural transport fund of £400,000 has been earmarked. Details will be announced soon of how we can help filling stations in rural areas. Local authorities and local enterprise companies can help small businesses in a variety of ways with tank testing or low interest loans.

All in all, a practical attempt is being made to help sustain rural life. That is advantageous to Scottish rural life. On Wednesday, in Scotland, we shall be outlining our White Paper on transport. Again, the importance of these issues will be recognised.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Is the Minister aware that the grave disadvantage that is faced by petrol stations in rural areas, notwithstanding the sensible, practical measures to which he referred, is the price of petrol that they are forced to charge, which is uncompetitive and is leading to people having to travel further and further afield? Will the hon. Gentleman seek to persuade his Treasury colleagues that variation in petrol duty and value added tax, which is within the rules of the European Union, is a course which should be considered seriously?

Mr. McLeish: We rightly have consistent petrol duties being applied throughout the United Kingdom. The Government are determined to take at face value the problems that we see in rural areas and try to apply practical measures. It may be easy to offer solutions that relate to petrol duty, but, in practice, they would be very difficult to administer and would prove extraordinarily difficult throughout the country. That is why we are concentrating on practical measures. I think that that is the way forward. Our approach is to identify issues that we can influence and, as a Government, to be serious with people in rural areas and not pretend that we can do things that we cannot.

Economic Development (Borders)

8. **Mr. Michael Moore** (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): If he will make an official visit to the borders to discuss economic development in the region. [49921]

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend has no immediate plans to visit the borders, but has kept in close touch with recent developments. Those recent developments include my visit to the borders on 2 and 3 July to discuss economic development issues with, among others, the hon. Gentleman. During that visit, I announced a wide package of new measures, including an additional £1 million for Scottish Borders Enterprise.

Mr. Moore: I acknowledge the importance of the initiatives announced by the Minister on his recent visit to the borders. They are the beginning of an answer to the

area's difficulties. Does he acknowledge the infrastructure problems about which he heard, and the need to help local businesses to diversify, about which the Scottish Affairs Select Committee heard yesterday when it visited the borders? When will the south of Scotland convention meet? That was one of the initiatives that he announced on his visit.

Mr. Wilson: I should like to express my appreciation to the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) for the arrangements that they helped to put in place for that visit. Everyone agreed that it was a positive response and the beginning of efforts to address the problems of the borders.

On the south of Scotland convention, the date that we propose—about which I should be happy to consult—is the end of September or the beginning of October. That would allow sufficient time for matters to develop after my visit, but not to drag on.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I am glad that the Minister enjoyed his visit to Scotland. May I suggest that he should make as many visits north of the border as he can, because, thanks to the craven approach of his Government to appeasing Scottish nationalist ambitions, it will not be long before he needs a passport to travel there?

Mr. Wilson: I am inclined to suggest that, if white coats are manufactured in the borders, the hon. Gentleman's remarks might assist the textile industry there.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): We are all aware of the serious situation in the borders, but the Minister will also be aware that unemployment in Dumfries and Galloway is double that in the borders. Therefore, will he consider visiting Dumfries and Galloway? As he has given an extra £1 million to Scottish Borders Enterprise, will he consider making a similar allocation to Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise, which would put that money to good use?

Mr. Wilson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not mean to be divisive, and that he would agree that there was a specific problem in the borders. Unemployment statistics do not tell us everything. We are witnessing in the borders the rapid deterioration of a key industry, and it was right for us to take the step that we took. Almost every one of my hon. Friends could make the same argument about some of the older industrial areas of Scotland having higher unemployment figures. What has been done in the borders is not at any other region's expense.

I shall be pleased to visit Dumfries and Galloway, and I hope to do so during the recess. The South of Scotland convention will be a useful forum—it is a one-off—to discuss on a wider basis the economic problems of the south of Scotland and to bring in the people from the other side of the border. That point was made and reinforced at the meeting in Hawick, because there is a movement of labour across the border. One cannot draw a line there, and the more people can come together to discuss the problems of the entire south of Scotland and the borders area, the better.

Local Government Reform

9. **Mr. Jimmy Hood** (Clydesdale): What plans he has for further local government reform in Scotland. [49922]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): The Government have a far-reaching agenda for reform and modernisation in local government, including the policy of best value to deliver better council services, the new ethical framework to regulate standards, and the independent commission under Neil MacIntosh, which is undertaking a fundamental review of the management and structure of local government.

Mr. Hood: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his many innovative ideas for local government reform in Scotland, and suggest another: as a way of improving the democratic process in local government, will he consider setting up select committees of back-bench councillors to scrutinise the work of local government and to make it more transparent and more accountable, both in the political process and in the administrative role of local government?

Mr. Macdonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his thoughtful and positive suggestion, which is squarely within the remit of the MacIntosh commission. One idea at which the commission is looking is whether Scottish local government should move to a more formal, Cabinet-style system rather than the committee system that is prevalent now. That would require a division between councillors' executive and representative functions along the lines that my hon. Friend suggests. I shall draw the commission's attention to this exchange and to his suggestion.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): As he seeks to reform local government, will the Minister also put in place proper measures to resolve something that has happened in my constituency? Last weekend, there was a massive landslide, which has closed the road from Kintyre, meaning that business and tourism cannot survive and people cannot get through. I hope that local government, in conjunction with the Scottish Office, can realign that road away from the rock-fall area.

Mr. Macdonald: That is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, but I appreciate the concern that the hon. Lady voices. My right hon. Friend has asked for a report on that incident and will look at it closely.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): I know that my hon. Friend is carrying out some excellent work on the future reform of Scottish local government, but I should like to ask two specific questions. First, in that process of change, what consultation is taking place with local citizens? Secondly, in any future consideration about a new form of local government elections, will he undertake to ensure that a link is maintained between constituent and elected member within the local authority boundary?

Mr. Macdonald: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the electoral system. That is one of the matters that will be borne in mind by those who reflect on that.

The independent commission carried out a full consultation during which it visited every local authority area. It not only talked to councillors and officials, but undertook public meetings at each visit, to which citizens could come along and make suggestions about the reform of local government.

Defence-related Employment

10. **Mr. Michael Colvin** (Romsey): When he last met representatives of Scottish Enterprise to discuss defence-related jobs in Scotland. [49923]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): I have regular meetings with representatives of Scottish Enterprise to discuss a range of issues, which has included their approach to defence-related industries. My most recent meeting was on 2 June.

Mr. Colvin: What assessment has Scottish Enterprise made of the impact of the strategic defence review, which was announced recently, on the Scottish economy? Is the Secretary of State aware that, in the country as a whole, a third of Ministry of Defence jobs are in the civilian sector and that some 400,000 people work in our defence-related industries? As the Government have decided to slash the defence budget by nearly £1 billion and the Secretary of State for Defence is now looking for more than £500 million of savings through greater efficiency and a similar amount through smarter procurement, what is the right hon. Gentleman's assessment of the number of jobs that that will cost Scotland?

Mr. Dewar: I recognise that it is in the hon. Gentleman's best interests to be a little gloomy about events—for a number of reasons, probably—but the strategic defence review was widely welcomed. It was certainly widely welcomed by the armed forces because it is centrally based on a strategic assessment of our defence needs.

As for Scotland, we have not had time to analyse the matter in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests. Scottish Enterprise has not been back to me with any views on that. I take the view that defence industries are extremely important in the Scottish context. I have a constituency interest in Yarrow, the frigate builders, for example; Scotland has big interests in electronics, with GEC at Groathill in Edinburgh; and there is the Rosyth dockyard. On the whole, Scotland appreciates the strategic drive behind the changes. There is probably some satisfaction in some of the decisions, and opportunities remain for the defence sector in Scotland.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Is it not good for Scotland to participate in armed forces that are big hitters in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and have the capacity to play an important part in United Nations international operations? My right hon. Friend may be aware that another party represented in the House wants to take Scottish troops out of the British armed forces and leave us with an army of tartan conscripts. Will he confirm that the Government have much higher ambitions for Scottish service men and the Scottish defence industry?

Mr. Dewar: I will resist the temptation to say that the general could perhaps wear a tartan lum-hat as he led his troops.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that there would be significant repercussions if we were to isolate ourselves by withdrawing from NATO. It is also true—I speak with some feeling because of the constituency interests that I mentioned—that, if Scottish defence contractors were unable to compete for defence orders for the British Army, or for the Army of what remained the United Kingdom with Scotland withdrawn, there would be a direct threat to employment prospects, which would be a serious and worrying matter for many of us.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Following on from the strategic defence review, will the Secretary of State acknowledge the considerable sense of relief in the south-west highlands about the longer-term securing of the British underwater test and evaluation centre range at Kyle of Lochalsh for torpedo testing? It is the most significant employer in the area in terms of skilled employment and the prospects for keeping young people there, but yesterday's written answer to me, which was made after the SDR outcome, suggests that is difficult for the Ministry of Defence to make predictions for the longer term—beyond the next five years or so. Will the Secretary of State undertake to ensure that the Scottish Office liaises closely with the MOD about the future of the facility, given that it provides such an underpinning of the local economy?

Mr. Dewar: Of course I will look at that and bear it in mind. The important issue is that any SDR has to be conditioned by our defence requirements and the strategy that we want to follow in those terms, but we are all conscious of the dangers to jobs that can result. On the whole, I regard the solution as balanced and sensible, and one that we welcome strongly in Scotland.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Legal Aid

29. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What recent representations he has received on the impact of proposed changes in the legal aid system on Merseyside. [49902]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): My hon. Friend will understand that our proposals have generated a great deal of interest. Unfortunately, letters and responses were not recorded by the geographical location of the sender and that information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. I was grateful to him, however, for his letter, to which I replied in April this year.

Mr. Chapman: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. He will appreciate that a number of my constituents on Merseyside who have been involved in medical accidents are particularly concerned about medical negligence, and he will be aware that that is an area of specialist expertise in the legal profession. Can he assure me that, when my constituents need advice in this area, they will be able to obtain it from specialist lawyers who may not necessarily be the family law firm or the solicitors who did their conveyancing?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is right to say that medical negligence is a specialist area of law that requires

specialist lawyers. It is profoundly disturbing that, in 1996–97, the client received damages of more than £50 in only 17 per cent. of all completed legally aided medical negligence cases; that means that 83 per cent. of clients got nothing or next to nothing after what was, inevitably, a long period of worry and considerable difficulty. We cannot allow that to continue. Therefore, we have announced that, by January 1999, the Legal Aid Board will contract only with specialist medical negligence lawyers. The issues in these claims are simply too important to my hon. Friend's constituents, and to our society as a whole, to be entrusted to those who merely dabble in this kind of work.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The people of Merseyside would have been interested in the Minister's reply to the written question from the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) on 16 July. The Minister rightly placed great emphasis on the advantages of franchising and contracting. To what extent will the general public or potential clients have available to them such information as the successful outcomes to cases by contracting or franchising firms?

Mr. Hoon: Certainly that is something which we shall be considering as we develop the franchising scheme and as we introduce legislation to allow us to contract with specialist lawyers, as I hope we will be able to do in due course, but it will be important for the public to know the qualifications and expertise of lawyers who do legally aided work.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett)—*[Interruption.]* I am almost transparent—referred to the written answer that the Minister gave last week at columns *278–79*. Is not one of the problems with that written answer that a representative of a client in Merseyside would not be able to work out with any certainty the timetable for the future development of conditional fee agreements and the other legal aid reforms? Will the Minister tell us with greater precision the exact timetable for the introduction of extended conditional fee agreements and the other changes that he and his boss in the Lord Chancellor's Department have proposed for the legal aid system?

Mr. Hoon: Like the good lawyer he is, the hon. and learned Gentleman can argue any case that is put in front of him, especially when he has a brief. In the past, he has criticised us for failing to consult, and now, as we respond to the various representatives that we have received following consultation, he is criticising us yet again. I assure him that the Government will make a statement in the autumn setting out the precise timetable and the proposals on which we intend to legislate if that is necessary.

Magistrates Courts

30. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): When he next intends to visit Lutterworth magistrates court to discuss the work of magistrates courts. [49903]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I have no immediate plans to visit Lutterworth magistrates court, not least because it will close at the end of next week. The decision to close the court was taken by Leicestershire magistrates courts committee following extensive local consultation, particularly with Leicestershire county council. It is perhaps significant that, as a result of that consultation, Leicestershire county council decided not to exercise its right of appeal against the closure. In the absence of an appeal, I have no opportunity to intervene.

Mr. Robathan: As the Minister so rightly said, Lutterworth magistrates court is closing at the end of next week. We have corresponded on this matter. Is he aware that local justice has been administered in Lutterworth for more than 500 years? Is he further aware that there is no reliable public transport between Lutterworth and Harborough or between Lutterworth and Leicester, which are the alternatives for court cases? Lutterworth is a bigger town than it has ever been, and it is still growing. Does the Minister believe in local justice being administered locally? Will he intervene at the eleventh hour—indeed, at one minute to midnight? He says that he has no powers, but he is the Minister, so who else can intervene if he cannot? The soon to be ennobled William Bach, who is a local resident in the Lutterworth area, has also made representations as a district councillor.

Mr. Hoon: I have made it clear that I have no power to intervene under the legislation that governs the way in which magistrates courts and magistrates courts committees operate, which was introduced by the previous Administration and for which the hon. Gentleman voted. I am sorry to tell him that, even at the eleventh hour, I am not in a position to intervene in this matter.

Lockerbie

31. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): How many officials of his Department are involved in legal matters relating to the destruction of Pan Am 103. [49904]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): None.

Mr. Dalyell: There will be an Adjournment debate on this matter tonight, so I have no further questions.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth): Notwithstanding the Minister's reply, have there been any discussions between the Lord Chancellor's Department and Foreign Office officials about a trial in a third country? I ask that question particularly in the light of the report on the front page of *The Guardian* today.

Mr. Hoon: None that I am aware of.

Land Registry

32. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What steps the Land Registry is taking to provide on-line access for the results of searches for domestic and commercial conveyancing. [49905]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Land Registry, in liaison with other central and local government bodies and private sector organisations, is developing a national land information service which will enable solicitors and licensed conveyancers to access on-line the results of searches required in the conveyancing process. I was delighted to have had the opportunity to launch a pilot conveyancing system on 1 July in Bristol, using this technology, and enabling solicitors to access data from 12 public and private sector organisations. The Land Registry also provides a direct access service which allows practitioners to view computerised registers on their own office personal computers and carry out a range of related services.

Mr. Watts: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. What further action can he and the Government take to speed up the process? Does he believe that new technology can help to speed it up? At the end of the process, does he believe that there will be an end to gazumping in the sale of houses and businesses?

Mr. Hoon: I entirely agree that providing information electronically will speed up conveyancing and reduce the opportunities for gazumping. A consultation document entitled "Land Registration for the 21st Century" was recently published by a joint working group consisting of representatives of the Law Commission and the Land Registry. Views are invited on a wide range of proposals which will make dealings in land much simpler, quicker and cheaper. Underlying the proposals is the likely move to electronic conveyancing over the coming decade.

Lewes Crown Court

34. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What plans he has to ensure that those who would expect to use Lewes Crown court are not redirected elsewhere. [49907]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Normally, all cases committed to Lewes Crown court are tried at that court. However, to reduce waiting times for hearings, cases can sometimes be transferred to other Crown court centres. Before any transfer, the interests of everyone involved in the case are taken into account and any objections considered.

Mr. Baker: Is the Parliamentary Secretary aware that, in 1997, approximately 10 per cent. of cases that normally would have been expected to be tried at Lewes were transferred elsewhere—to Croydon, Chichester and further afield? That represents a considerable inconvenience for those involved in the cases, and long journeys—some by public transport, and some not, despite the statement by the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that a higher percentage of cases are dealt with at Lewes to minimise the inconvenience that people are suffering?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is right. In 1997, 117 cases were transferred from Lewes, but, in each, benefits will have been provided to the many witnesses, victims and innocent defendants as a result of the cases being decided earlier than they would otherwise have been. All parties involved are consulted and the interests of victims and witnesses are taken into account before any such decision is made. The hon. Gentleman may like to know that there have been no transfers from Lewes since February this year.

Woolf Report

35. **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): What steps his Department is taking to consult on the costs rules to be operated in fast-track cases under the reforms of civil procedures set out in the Woolf report. [49908]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): On 22 June, the Lord Chancellor's Department issued a consultation paper on a costs regime for the fast track entitled "Justice at the Right Price". The consultation paper seeks comments by 17 August.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that solicitors instructed by trade unions have provided an efficient and good service for trade union members at a modest cost in personal injury actions? Will he assure me that, in devising a system of costs for fast-track cases, he will take into account any potential detrimental effect of a fixed-costs regime being imposed on defendants before they have had a chance to look at their methods of operating systems to ensure that they comply with the rigours of the fast track?

Mr. Hoon: As I have told the House on a number of occasions, I believe that the legal advice schemes provided by trade unions to their members are extremely effective. I would not wish to implement any new system that affected their operation or effectiveness. At the same time, we cannot ignore the deep-seated problems of high cost acting as a barrier to access to our courts. I assure my hon. Friend that changes will be made only when we are entirely confident that they will operate in the interests of the litigants and of society as a whole.

Conditional Fees

36. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): When he proposes to put before the House the regulations extending conditional fee agreements. [49909]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): A draft order was laid before the House on 16 July.

Mr. Winterton: I thank the Minister for his reply. In principle, I am in favour of conditional fee agreements because they can provide increased access to justice in addition to that which is available today. Does he agree that, if conditional fee agreements are to be successful, there must be adequate insurance cover for that purpose? At the moment, it appears that there is little guidance available from the Government and the Lord Chancellor's Department. Will he provide guidance so that, when the conditional fee agreements come in—as I hope they will—there will be adequate insurance to ensure that they are successful?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. He is right to say that conditional fees depend on

adequate and effective insurance cover. The Government have had a series of meetings with different insurance providers, and it is clear that a wide variety of products will be available to support conditional fee agreements. Inevitably, the industry is waiting to see the results of any change in the law that Parliament might approve. It is necessary that we go ahead, lay the order before Parliament and seek parliamentary approval. We are confident that insurance products will be available to support an extension of conditional fee agreements.

Legal Aid and Civil Justice White Paper

37. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): When he expects the White Paper on modernising legal aid and civil justice to be published. [49910]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government intend to publish in the autumn a comprehensive statement setting out their wide-ranging programme for reforming and modernising access to justice.

Mr. Flight: To what extent has that cost already been anticipated in last week's spending announcement by the Chancellor? Does the White Paper anticipate any difference in approach to legal aid between criminal and civil cases? Certainly in my experience, there is misuse of civil legal aid.

Mr. Hoon: Clearly, in publishing our expenditure proposals for the next three years, the Government have taken fully into account the need to reform the system of legal aid, which has been failing everyone. The system is out of control. It might interest the hon. Gentleman to know that, in a continuing trend, in 1997–98 the Legal Aid Board paid some 30,000 fewer bills, but their cost was some £28 million greater. Once again, the taxpayer has been paying more but getting less.

Criminal Justice

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the comprehensive spending review and the criminal justice system.

May I open by expressing my gratitude to the Liberal Democrats for accommodating this statement on their Opposition day, and say that I am making it not least in response to representations from them?

In our election manifesto, we promised to reform the criminal justice system, to tackle youth crime and to reduce levels of crime and disorder. Therefore, I greatly welcome the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, which has targeted resources where they are most needed to deliver those manifesto commitments. The Home Office will receive an additional £3 billion over the next three years. That money will be invested in modernisation and reform to help us to build the safer, fairer society to which we are committed. Across Government, the comprehensive spending review represents an end to short-term thinking and should allow public services to plan with greater confidence over a longer period.

We need first to improve the performance and management of the criminal justice system overall. We have to provide clear, strategic direction to ensure that the different parts of the system work efficiently and coherently together. Therefore, for the first time, the Government have agreed new over-arching aims for the criminal justice system. They are to reduce crime and the fear of crime, and their social and economic costs; to dispense justice fairly and efficiently; and to promote confidence in the rule of law. Those aims will drive Government policy for the criminal justice system as a whole.

To modernise the services, we shall be establishing joint, strategic planning; improving and integrating services' information technology; and aligning boundaries more closely. I have today placed in the Library a copy of a more detailed statement about those plans.

To oversee those structures, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has asked me to chair a new ministerial group, which will include my right hon. and learned Friends the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney-General and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

I think that the whole House acknowledges that criminal justice agencies cannot by themselves deliver the safer society that we all want. If we are to make an effective attack on crime and its causes, we need to work in partnership right across Government and beyond. The Crime and Disorder Bill therefore provides for statutory partnerships to analyse local crime problems and then draw up strategies to reduce crime and disorder at a local level.

The new anti-social behaviour order will tackle the problem of criminal anti-social neighbours, who can make life a misery for those who are affected by them. The Crime and Disorder Bill also radically reforms the youth justice system. It establishes new multi-agency youth offending teams, a new police final warning scheme and new court orders. Those will ensure that young offenders make reparation to victims or to the community, and that their parents take greater responsibility for their offending behaviour.

A new national Youth Justice Board is to be established. It will administer a development fund for local programmes, including bail supervision and mentoring. The board will set standards for the youth justice system as a whole.

We will take forward a programme of work to reform the quality and delivery of secure accommodation for sentenced and remanded juveniles. In the short term, that includes work that the Prison Service has in hand to improve the care and quality of regimes for young people who are held in young offender institutions. In the longer term, we aim to provide for greater coherency and efficiency in the delivery of secure accommodation through extending the role of the new Youth Justice Board to include commissioning and purchasing of places. Additional resources are being made available for new secure facilities and to improve the constructive regimes for juveniles when our new detention and training orders come into force next year.

As part of those changes, we will deliver our pledge to halve the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders. When we came to office, we found that, on average, it took 142 days from arrest to sentence—more than 20 weeks or five months, a wholly unacceptable delay. The Lord Chancellor and I have worked hard to persuade the youth courts to introduce fast-track schemes. More than 160 schemes have so far been introduced or are planned; compare that with the fact that just 12 were extant when we took office. We shall use some additional resources to ensure that that pledge is fully delivered within the next two to three years.

In our manifesto, we said that we would be tough on crime and on its causes. Individuals must take responsibility for their criminal behaviour, but we also have to recognise that crime breeds where there is family breakdown and social exclusion. For many years, Governments have concentrated too much on the effects of crime, to the detriment of its causes, but we can make a long-term impact on crime and disorder only by concentrating on both crime and its causes.

Since the 1920s, the underlying rate of crime has risen by about 5 per cent. a year. There have been two periods when it has fallen: one from 1948 to 1953; the other since 1992. The first proved short-lived; the danger is that the second may, too. Increases in crime have, to many, appeared inexorable. "There is nothing you can do," is the claim, "it is a fact of life." The assumption has been that "nothing works"—that nothing could be done to reverse the long-term rise in crime. Indeed, that was the dismal conclusion of Governments both in the 1970s and 1980s. I disagree, and I hope that that disagreement is shared by hon. Members across the House.

Therefore, as part of the comprehensive spending review, I asked the research and statistics department of the Home Office to undertake a thorough investigation of all available national and international evidence to identify "what works" to reduce crime and disorder. Its conclusions are included in a report entitled "Reducing offending", which I am publishing today. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

That report provides concrete research evidence that we can make a difference. It shows that investing resources where it matters can have long-term benefits in reducing offending. It also shows that the most cost-effective strategy for reducing crime has three strands:

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the promotion of a less criminal society by preventing young people from becoming criminals and by investing in measures that reduce the opportunity for crime; the prevention of crime in the community by acting on the social conditions that sustain crime and by effective policing; and using sentencing policy effectively to change the behaviour of offenders, including, importantly, drug users.

Therefore, I am pleased to announce that the Government will invest £250 million over the next three years on a crime reduction strategy that draws on the findings of that research. This will be the first time that a centrally co-ordinated programme of such magnitude, based on comprehensive research evidence and with in-built evaluation, has been put in place anywhere in the world. As a result, we should be able to make a significant contribution to reducing crime and the number of victims.

That programme will tackle the social causes of crime through long-term investment in children, families and schools. We will target crime prevention measures on crime hotspots and reduce the opportunities for crime. There will be new investment to tackle burglary. We will help the police to target their efforts to reduce the pattern of repeat attacks on the same victims. Where prevention has failed, the prison and probation services will work with offenders to help to cut reoffending rates.

Some of those initiatives, for example those with young children and families, will take up to 10 years to make an impact on crime, but even those programmes will have an earlier impact on the factors that predispose people to later criminality. However, some measures will work quickly—for example, burglary prevention makes a speedy and tangible improvement to people's lives, as the safer cities programme of the previous Administration very well illustrated.

As well as proposals to tackle crime and its causes, the Government will pay more attention to the needs of victims and witnesses, especially those who are vulnerable or intimidated. We will provide extra resources to improve services in the magistrates courts and for the support of victims. The strategy I have described should do much to lessen the impact of crime and the misery it causes.

The comprehensive spending review for the Home Office also makes substantial additional provision for the police, prison and probation services. Currently, the police spend £7 billion a year. We will allocate an extra £1.24 billion over the next three years, to add to that £7 billion. However, this has to be accompanied by improved efficiency, with the savings recycled into front-line policing priorities. The police settlement will therefore include targets for efficiency improvements of 2 per cent. a year. Part of the additional funding for the second and third years will be dependent on the police achieving those targets.

For the Prison Service, the settlement provides an additional £660 million over the next three years. Some of that money will be used for additional prison capacity to meet the pressure of rising numbers of prisoners and to clear the backlog of urgent repair and maintenance. However, prisons will fully protect the public only if they not only incarcerate prisoners securely during their sentence, but reduce reoffending on release of those prisoners. Therefore, we are providing for a significant increase in purposeful activity within prisons in the next three years. There will be more sex offender treatment programmes; extensions of the welfare-to-work pilots in prisons; improvements in education for juveniles and adults; and increases in the number of probation officers providing through-care support.

To meet part of the costs of those initiatives, I am looking to the Prison Service to implement a new efficiency strategy. Every pound saved will go back into the Prison Service to help fund more programmes to reduce reoffending.

For the probation service, there will be an additional £18 million of grant next year instead of the £6 million cut planned by the previous Administration. In total, the settlement gives an extra £127 million to the probation service over the three years. That will enable the service to take up important new responsibilities under the Crime and Disorder Bill, such as extended supervision of sex offenders and involvement in the new youth offending teams.

The probation service, too, will be required to make further improvements in efficiency. That drive will be reinforced by improved joint working between the prison and probation services. We will shortly be publishing a consultation document on our proposals for this improved collaboration between those two important services.

Taken together, the measures that I have announced today will help to bind and strengthen our communities; build a safe, just and tolerant society; and should make Britain a better place in which to live. I commend them to the House.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): We welcome the publication of the Home Office research study, "Reducing offending". Work on that started three years ago, under the Conservative Government. Some of the proposals, such as that on better parenting, are entirely sensible.

We should take all opportunities to reduce and prevent crime. However, as the Home Secretary acknowledged, some of the proposed schemes will not produce results for many years to come. Indeed, we are interested to note that the early pledge at the general election to halve the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders has now become a pledge

"within the next two to three years."

Against a background where the public want action now, I want to ask the right hon. Gentleman a number of brief questions. First, is not it a fact that any strategy for fighting crime depends on strong professional services—a strong probation service, a strong Prison Service and, above all, a strong police service?

Does the Home Secretary therefore stand by the figures in last week's press release from his Department, which show that, for police, there will be only a 0.1 per cent. real-terms spending increase in the first year, 0.3 per cent. in the second year and 1.4 per cent. in the third year? Does he acknowledge that that average of 0.6 per cent. compares very badly with an average annual real-terms increase of 3.4 per cent. over the 18 years of the Conservative Government, and that those increases were additional to any efficiency savings?

The Home Secretary talked about a cash increase for police of £1.2 billion over the next three years. Does he agree that the Government will therefore spend on police

£2.6 billion in cash over the whole five-year period 1997–2002? Does he realise that, in the five years 1992–97, the previous Government spent on police almost £4.5 billion extra in cash, again underlining our commitment to the service?

Additionally—using those same cash figures—will the Home Secretary tell the House what cash resources it is planned to devote to political asylum seekers, for whom he has now taken on responsibility? All hon. Members will want to know what the cash cost of those plans will be over the period.

On the vital question of what the money will buy, will the Home Secretary confirm that, in the 18 years of Conservative Governments, police strength increased by over 15,000—or by 14 per cent? Does he realise that many United Kingdom police forces now stand on the verge of reductions in strength? Does he agree that one of the forces facing a fall in manpower is the Metropolitan police, where he still acts as the police authority? Rather than more men and women on the beat, we now face the prospect of fewer on the beat. May I personally tell the Home Secretary that they will not be sensibly replaced by red-coated local authority street patrols?

Is it not true that, however the sums are done or whatever spin is put on the story, the police are not being accorded the same priority as they were by the previous Government? In the next year, that will inevitably harm the public and, above all, harm the war against crime in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman's welcome for publication of the research, some of which, as I acknowledged, is based on the experience of the previous Administration—including the safer cities programme, which we greatly welcomed at the time and which had an important impact. However—on a small detail—the research was commissioned by me as part of the comprehensive spending review and could not have been commissioned by the previous Administration. The previous Administration cut funding for the research and statistics department from £2 million to £800,000—a 60 per cent. cut—so little did they subscribe to the idea of research.

I should now deal with the central charge made by the shadow Home Secretary—the issue of resources to police. However, I should first say that he has exposed further profound confusion—to put it at its best—at the heart of the Conservative leadership. The criticism of the Government's programme offered by each Opposition spokesman shadowing a spending Department has been that more, not less, money should be spent.

Sir Norman Fowler: More police.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Gentleman says, "More police." The shadow spokesman on schools says, "More teachers", and the shadow Health Secretary says, "More nurses". It is ratcheting up and up. The right hon. Gentleman has just called for an extra £2 billion. Shadow Ministers call for more spending on individual services, but less spending on services overall. The public will not be conned by such a trick. Indeed, only a week ago, the shadow Chancellor said at the Dispatch Box that his overall criticism of the comprehensive spending review was that we could not control public spending and that there ought to be less public spending rather than more.

Sir Norman Fowler: Get on with it.

Mr. Straw: I will get on with it; I will make the charge against the right hon. Gentleman and other Conservative Members of speaking in tongues, of double talk, of saying one thing one day and another the next.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield asked me about resources devoted to asylum seekers. He made that error this morning, which I sought to correct. I am only sorry that he did not listen to my correction, which was broadcast on "Today" on Radio 4—shortly after the thought for the day. He was assuming that the money that will be transferred from other Departments to cover support for asylum seekers is included in the £3 billion. That may have been a sleight of hand committed by an Administration of whom he was an adornment, but it is not one to which I am committed. I intend to publish a White Paper on the immigration and asylum system next week, when full details will be disclosed to the House.

The right hon. Member asked me about police strength. Again, he makes an error. He asserted that the amounts of money going into the police had risen inexorably under the previous Administration and that that had therefore led to an inexorable rise in police numbers. He fails to recognise that police numbers fell under the Conservative Administration from 1992. Indeed, despite the previous Administration committing themselves to spending for an extra 5,000 officers, figures for 1 March 1998, the last period for which the previous Administration set the Budget, showed an overall fall in numbers of 200. That included a fall in the Metropolitan police area of 437.

The right hon. Member should take on board the point about efficiency of the police service. Every other public service—not least when he was a Secretary of State—had to undergo efficiency improvements. On the whole, they benefited from doing more for less.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, has said that there is a huge variation in the efficiency and effectiveness of the police service and that it is not related to resources. The challenge for us all is to ensure that, from such an important public service as the police, we get the most effective and efficient results, we are able to draw on best practice, and forces improve their efficiency—as the PAC recommended only last week in a very important report on police sickness, and as the Audit Commission recommended.

Such improvements in efficiency and effectiveness, taken together with the £250 million that we are investing in crime reduction strategies, will make the job of the police in tackling crime and disorder far more effective than it was under the Government of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): May I welcome the introduction of long-term thinking into the management of the criminal justice system? I particularly welcome the extra resources that are going into the probation service, and I endorse the Home Secretary's point that we must require that the police make better use of existing resources before we consider providing further

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resources. May I put to him that, in the long term, the best way to reduce offending, particularly among juveniles, is to divert vulnerable juveniles who have not yet offended into constructive activity, rather than having to spend a great deal of money locking some of them up later on when it has all gone wrong?

Although I appreciate that that is a long-term matter and that other Departments will be responsible for part of the strategy as well as his own, that must be the long-term overall aim in reducing juvenile offending.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's endorsement. He speaks from a position of great authority as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—[HON. MEMBERS: "Home Affairs Committee."] I am sorry, the Chairman of the PAC is on my mind, given that he said:

"There is enormous variation in the performance of police forces".

My hon. Friend is Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and he was a member of the Committee when it produced an important report recommending regulation of the private security industry. At the Association of Chief Police Officers conference last week, Ian Blair, the chief constable of Surrey, and I talked about the importance of regulating the private security industry to prevent the scandal tolerated by the Opposition of crooks being able to employ other crooks to pursue criminal activities.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Liberal Democrats welcome much of the Home Secretary's statement, particularly his announcement of research and his confirmation that we are moving away from the "nothing works" agenda. I share his view that the Government can and should do far more to reduce offending and to seek rehabilitation of offenders. We welcome the joint aims for the various criminal justice departments, and we look forward to seeing them all work together in perfect harmony.

Does the Home Secretary agree that the spending that he has announced is simply the bare necessities to keep the prison, probation and police services going? Does he agree that the probation service, which lost 10 per cent. of its staff between 1994 and 1997, has been thrown a lifeline, confirming our view that, under the plans of the previous Government, it would have been unable to fulfil its statutory duties? Does he agree that the police funding settlement will stem the decline in police numbers, which are 150 down since Labour took power, and 700 down since 1992? While the Home Secretary has no direct responsibility for police numbers, will he hazard a guess at whether his settlement will lead to an increase or a further fall?

Will the Home Secretary assure the House that the Prison Service budget will genuinely be spent on better regimes that lead to rehabilitation? What assessment has he made of the increases in prison numbers, which seem likely to soak up money? Will he confirm that police efficiency savings will not be to the detriment of forces that have good sickness and retirement records? If efficiency measures are to be based on sickness and retirement, forces that have appalling records should not get extra cash merely because they bring the figures down to normal while those with good records miss out on extra funding.

Mr. Straw: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the statement's overall purpose, and I thank his right hon. and hon. Friends for accommodating me while I make the statement.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that the new joint aims and our new machinery might achieve perfect harmony. I do not make that claim, but they will produce better co-ordination than exists now. I do not accept that the settlement provides merely the "bare necessities" to keep the services going, but I note that the hon. Gentleman's words run contrary to assertions from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler).

The probation service's resources have been stripped bare despite an increased work load. A 20 per cent. increase in efficiency has been extracted from the service over the past few years, but it faced a further £8 million cut which would have been impossible to achieve.

The service will still be required to produce efficiencies. We seek—as, to their credit, the previous Government did with education, although they seem unwilling to learn the lesson for criminal justice—to compare the best practice of one force or service with that of another. Then we can say that those forces or services that are lagging behind can follow the best examples. In the police, prison and probation services, some institutions are doing far better on fewer resources. We should learn from that, so that we can put money into helping to reduce offending.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to guess whether the settlement would lead to a reduction in the decline in police numbers that occurred under the previous Administration. I will not make such a guess. Under the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, which was introduced by the previous Government, but which the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield seems to have forgotten, the Home Secretary has no power to set the establishment of the police service. It is a matter for chief constables and police authorities.

As I have said, part of the Prison Service's increase of £660 million will be used to pay for increased prison numbers. I can make available details of the projections for the next four years. We are providing an additional 2,500 places in this financial year.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) made an important point about sickness and retirement. He suggested that we should seek to modify how the police grant operates so that it rewards the efficient and discriminates against the inefficient. We are seeking to do that. It remains to be seen whether we can, but it is certainly my intention.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is my right hon. Friend aware that my constituents look forward to seeing clear results from his very welcome statement, given the disturbing amount of crime committed by youths, young people and even children in my constituency, including attacks on elderly people in their homes and in the streets? For example, a woman pensioner was attacked by two 13-year-old girls, a 12-year-old boy and a 10-year-old boy who hit her across the back with a piece of wood and on the head with half

a brick. Too many such events occur in my constituency. It is no accident that the area concerned is one of the most deprived in my constituency.

We look forward not only to the welcome action to deal with the causes of crime, but, where appropriate, to more punishment, more charges, more charges in place of cautions and to the bringing home to young people, children and their parents that such anti-social behaviour will not be tolerated by a Labour Government.

Mr. Straw: Yes, I can give my right hon. Friend those undertakings. I am grateful for his welcome. One of the extraordinary things about the previous Administration—I am sorry that the Conservatives did not give the statement a full-hearted welcome—was that they were there for 18 years, but allowed the youth justice system to fall into thorough decay. The result was spree offenders offending 30, 40, 50 or, as in Newark, 80 times without being put in secure accommodation, and youngsters being cautioned, cautioned and cautioned again. I am glad that the Opposition now support anti-social behaviour orders. I wish only that they had supported them when we were in opposition and put them forward on a housing Bill. The orders would have been in place to save families from the terrible ravages that they have suffered in recent years.

We intend to introduce a thorough-going reform of the youth justice system, with a clear hierarchy of punishments. We are abandoning the use of endless cautions. There will be a reprimand, a final warning and then clear charges. If punishment in the community does not work, youngsters will be put in custody. Another change that we are introducing is that we are giving the courts the power to remand youngsters in custody, rather than leaving it to directors of social services.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I hope that the Home Secretary will acknowledge that if he were to ask one of my constituents what they would like for a luxury, whether or not they were on a desert island, they would probably ask for a bobby on the beat, something which, sadly, has become a luxury because of Labour's cuts—*[Interruption.]*—Labour's savage cuts in Lincolnshire's police budget last year. Will he answer the question that he was asked before: how much money has been transferred to deal with asylum seekers?

Mr. Straw: This is a statement about criminal justice. I will make a statement to the House about asylum and immigration next week, but I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the figures that he seeks: £350 million in 1999–2000; £300 million in 2000–01; and £250 million in 2001–02. As we are transferring costs from other Departments—some of the sums are in social services and housing budgets—these are provisional figures at present. We are doing what the previous Administration should have done: ending the chaotic system of support for asylum seekers.

As to Lincolnshire's budget, I can only repeat what the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), told the chief constable, Mr. Childs, when he met him recently. Given the recent history of Lincolnshire constabulary, they have a great deal of making up to do in terms of efficiency before they come to us with a begging bowl.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the concern expressed by many of my constituents last year following the release from prison of Robert Oliver and the additional burdens that his release placed on the local probation service, the police and social services. Will my right hon. Friend join me in placing on record thanks for the sensitive way in which those agencies dealt with that situation? Will he also inform the House how, in light of the lessons learned from that and similar cases, that experience has been brought to bear in making resources available to the probation service and other relevant agencies to provide for the future extended supervision of sex offenders following their release from prison?

Mr. Straw: Yes, I pay tribute to all those involved in the probation service, police service, social services and the Prison Service for the sensitive way in which they have dealt with those issues. I put on the record my appreciation of the fact that those difficulties are recognised across the Chamber. I applaud the way in which the hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and my hon. Friend and many others have dealt with such cases in their areas.

As for resources, as I said in my statement, we are allocating an extra £127 million to the probation service. Part of that sum will be used for the early implementation of the sex offender orders. Those orders will attach to sex offenders who were sentenced before 1991 and who presently have no conditions attached to their release, in order to ensure better protection for the public.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am very glad that the Home Secretary referred to the chief constable of Surrey, Mr. Ian Blair. He is an outstanding chief constable, but he is wrestling with the problem of taking a savage cut in the provision of resources to the Surrey police last year. Surrey has the most successful record in crime prevention in the country, which is founded on the provision of policing that is largely community based. It will be undermined if there are further cuts in the funding for Surrey's police. Can the Home Secretary offer any hope today to my constituents and to the chief constable of Surrey?

Mr. Straw: I pay tribute to the chief constable of Surrey, who is one of many very impressive chief constables. The savage cut to Surrey's budget last year was a Tory cut. *[Interruption.]* Well, it was. The budget for 1997–98 was set by the previous Administration and we came to office on 1 May, one month into the financial year. *[Interruption.]* It is true. The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) is gaping, as though he fails to recognise the date of the general election. It may have passed him by: he was one of the few Tories for whom it was not wholly traumatic because he won his seat. The 1997-98 financial year came into force on 1 April 1997 and we took office on 1 May, a full 30 days later.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to reducing crime and, particularly, his emphasis on crime prevention? Are any of his initiatives aimed at getting an increasingly young population out of prostitution? Given that many

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young people go into prostitution in order to fund a drug habit, what initiatives does my right hon. Friend intend to introduce to help drug users kick the habit?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend raises a serious problem. The first point, on which there will be agreement on both sides of the House, is that we should treat child prostitutes, not as criminals, but as victims of serious and unpleasant criminals; and that only in exceptional circumstances, when they are near adulthood, should they be treated as criminals. My hon. Friend is probably aware that a great deal of effort has been made by the Government and the police to develop ways to deal much more effectively with the problem of child prostitution: for example, West Midlands police carried out pioneering work in the Wolverhampton area. Some of the money of which I have spoken today will be available for dealing with that problem.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the President of the Council, who leads for the Government on drug treatment and overall drugs policy, will be making a statement about the additional resources that we are allocating to be specifically targeted on the major drug problem that this country faces.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am sure that the House will have noted the Home Secretary's recognition of the fall in recorded crime achieved since 1992 and welcomed his objective of sustaining the Conservative Government's record in that respect. Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that, in my county of Cambridgeshire, the increase in the number of police in recent years has been counted as a significant factor in achieving a fall in recorded crime? Notwithstanding that he cannot set establishment figures, will he say whether he regards his statement as consistent with an increase or a decrease in police numbers, and on what assumptions does he base that view? Given the importance, especially in rural areas, of visible policing—the bobbies on the beat to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) referred—will he say why he has removed visible policing as a key objective for police forces?

Mr. Straw: As I said, the previous Government learned a hard lesson. Under legislation that they brought before the House and passed, the setting of police numbers was made a matter for police authorities and chief constables alone. The previous Government said that they were providing additional money to pay for more officers—the number varied according to the tune: sometimes it was 5,000 more officers; sometimes it was 2,000—but the reality was that, by the end of the 1992 Government, 200 fewer officers were available. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield talks about the previous period, and I want to see more officers wherever possible, but, if we are to have a serious debate about the relationship between the number of police officers and the rise in crime, we must recognise that, during the 1980s, when there was a significant increase in the number of police officers—although not as significant as the 2,000 a year which the Labour Government put in place between 1974 and 1979; it was only 800 a year under the Conservatives—crime rose very much faster.

It is a matter of interest—I put it no more strongly than that—that, during the period when the number of police officers levelled out, crime fell. There are interesting comparisons—*[Interruption.]* Conservatives Members seek, and sought when they were in government, efficiency improvements in other public services, but they close their eyes to any application of research or science in this area. They should look at the evidence of the Audit Commission, which they established. It looked at the difference in performance between Surrey and Kent constabularies, which cover similar areas, and revealed that, over a certain period, Kent constabulary did significantly better than Surrey constabulary, even though it had lower resources. That is the sort of thing which ought to be taken on board.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many people welcome his commitment of extra resources for vulnerable witnesses? Last night in the House, a number of hon. Members attended a meeting of Voice, an all-party group for people with learning difficulties, and heard of some of the harrowing experiences of people with learning difficulties who have been victims of crime. Their statements were quite horrific and upsetting. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that some of the money being spent on supporting vulnerable witnesses will be used for training of court staff and judges and for examining procedures, so that such people are dealt with sympathetically and to ensure true justice?

Mr. Straw: I give my hon. Friend that assurance and draw her attention to the consultative document on the treatment of vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, which I published about eight weeks ago. It makes many improvements, both in terms of changes to the criminal law and criminal procedure, especially in respect of cross-examination, and in the sort of support with which victims and witnesses ought to be better provided, both in court and outside.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister was crowing about concessions that he had wrung out of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in respect of hypothecation. Has the Home Secretary been equally successful? If so, does that mean that the police will be able to reinvest the fines and penalties that come from speed cameras in more speed cameras?

Mr. Straw: As "Reducing offending" makes clear, changes are being made in the treatment of income from such fines and charges. A significant change has been brought about—a change, that is, from the extraordinarily dogmatic policy followed by the last Administration. I hope to make an announcement in due course, as does my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, whose responsibility this is.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Will these measures augment or diminish the stratagem so publicly imported from the United States—the much-vaunted zero tolerance programme?

Mr. Straw: Zero tolerance is a matter for individual police forces. Interestingly, "Reducing offending"—

a copy of which is in the Vote Office—discusses the issue, and what the research suggests. It says that there is

"moderately strong evidence that it can reduce serious crime in the short term",

but that there are

"large question marks over the ability of the police to distinguish between firm and harsh policing styles".

It adds that

"zero-tolerance may offer an attractive short term reduction in crime, but . . . it must also be evaluated against its long term effects on those arrested, and the communities from which they come."

"Zero tolerance" is a phrase which is used differently in different contexts—

Sir Norman Fowler: Including by the Home Secretary.

Mr. Straw: Of course. It is not a particularly scientific term, and I am not sure whether "Reducing offending" uses it in the context in which I would use it. What I am clear about—and the evidence supports this—is that effective police action against small crimes can stop large-scale crime developing. The research evidence for that is striking. It shows—I am happy to concede that the research was carried out under the last Administration—that there is a four times greater chance of people becoming victims of serious crimes of violence in areas of incivility where small crimes are ignored, than in areas of civility.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): For the avoidance of doubt, the grant settlement referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) was the settlement agreed after the general election, for the coming year.

If the record of Lincolnshire police is so wanting, why did the chief inspector of constabulary take particular care to single out for praise Lincolnshire's record in terms of efficiency gains?

Mr. Straw: I should point out that the baseline on which we are working for the current financial year was established by the previous Administration.

Mr. Leigh: The right hon. Gentleman altered it.

Mr. Straw: Yes, I altered it—to provide additional police resources that the last Administration would not have provided.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most important deterrent to crime is not the number of people in prison, but what they do when they are in prison? His statement that every pound saved will go back into education and probation will be enormously welcome in the probation service.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the second most important way of preventing crime is stopping teenagers from getting into trouble in the first place? In that context, his £250 million crime reduction strategy will be a great relief. Can he tell us anything about the mentoring of teenagers in trouble, a scheme pioneered by Crime Concern and the Dalston youth project and, in the United States, by Big Brothers and Sisters? Big Brothers and Sisters has set up a branch in my constituency, which hopes to launch its operations soon.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is right. The kind of regime that prisoners follow is crucially important; otherwise, to quote David—now Lord—Waddington, prison can end up by making bad people worse. My first responsibility is to ensure that there are sufficient places in prisons to meet the demands of the courts, which are entirely independent; but I must then ensure that the regimes are as constructive as possible. That applies not only to education, but to other activities.

My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that catching teenagers before they get into serious trouble is the crucial challenge. It is astonishing how negligent the last Administration were in simply ignoring the whole issue of the youth justice system.

I applaud the provision of mentoring schemes. I have seen the one at Dalston, but not the one in my hon. Friend's constituency. We are planning that the national Youth Justice Board should itself sponsor many more mentoring schemes than are currently under way.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): May I welcome particularly the Home Secretary's comments on work for preventing criminality, which is set out in chapter 2 of "Reducing offending"? In that context, may I press the right hon. Gentleman a little further about the resources that will be allocated to deal with that work? When I raised the matter with him in the House a year ago, it was pointed out that the matter fell rather outside the Home Office's remit. Are we to take it, therefore, that the remit has been changed?

How much of the £250 million will go to working with parents with quite small children to prevent the growth of delinquency, or will another Government Department be doing that? What assurance can the right hon. Gentleman give me and the House on the proportion of the £250 million that will be going to that type of work rather than to issues raised by many hon. Members relating to older offenders or delinquents?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the welcome that he gives. I cannot give him a precise answer today on the amount that will be allocated to specific projects on parenting because we have only just made the allocation, which will come into force from 1 April next year. I will ensure that he is provided with that information as soon as it becomes available to us and can be made public.

The £250 million represents a change in the way in which the Government operate. Quite a substantial proportion of it will be "spent" by other Government Departments. As we learned, not least from the safer cities project, if we want to cut crime we do it by ensuring that effort is made not by one Government Department or one local authority department but across a number of Departments. Quite a number of the programmes that we plan to sponsor will be education based and some will be social services based. Others will be sponsored, for example, by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions because they are to do with the built environment. We are aiming to ensure, and we will ensure, that these programmes are properly co-ordinated,

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are funded centrally and, critically, are evaluated, so we do not end up in a situation in which we have found ourselves too often in the past under Governments of both parties, where good work is done, is then forgotten and then has to be reinvented.

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on all the measures that he has announced, but particularly on the research, which is long overdue, and on the extra resources for the probation service, especially as, during the last three years of the previous Government, expenditure on the probation service was cut by about 25 per cent? During that period, the only contribution to criminal justice policy was the slogan "Prison works", with all the consequences of which we are aware.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that some resources are invested in improving the national standards achieved by probation services and in developing much more effective and rigorous alternatives to custody in which the police and sentencers can have confidence?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her welcome of the statement. Some of the resources should be devoted to improving national standards, although, to make a point that I have almost laboured, I draw attention to the fact that some probation services are already delivering a level of national standards within existing resources while others, which may be getting more resources, are doing less well.

My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the need for rigorous alternatives to custody that have the confidence of the police and sentencers. I know that an inquiry is under way by the Home Affairs Committee on this issue, and we look forward to its results. In the Crime and Disorder Bill, there is provision for a drug treatment and testing order, with mandatory and random drug testing. That is an example of the rigorous community punishment that we wish to see.

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): Does my right hon. Friend share the concerns expressed in the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the Metropolitan police? The Committee found that, on a typical day such as today, 1,500 officers will be on sick leave, which means the loss of about 400,000 days each year at a cost to the taxpayer of £122 million. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there must be scope for savings there so that we can secure added resources for front-line services?

Mr. Straw: Yes, I do. I am grateful to the Public Accounts Committee for its report, which the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis takes seriously. It makes the important point that, through better management by police services, we can ensure that there are more front-line officers available, within existing budgets.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I welcome my right hon. Friend's emphasis on dealing with the fear of crime. What is his response to the many representations made by pensioner groups on the matter, in particular Pensioners Voice in my constituency? What steps might the Government take to deal with the specific concerns of pensioners, who are often kept virtual prisoners in their homes by the fear of what they will find outside their front door?

Mr. Straw: The research looked at a range of good initiatives across the country. I saw a scheme today in Merton, in south London, where the provision of alarms that are worn around the neck by the elderly has transformed the quality of life of people on an estate. I spoke to one of the women who have led the scheme. She said that people now feel safer. I commend the work of the Metropolitan police in that area in helping to get the scheme together. By the investment of a relatively small sum, the quality of life of people there has been transformed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We must make progress on the business before us.

Seed Trials

4.25 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you had a request from the Government for a statement on today's Court of Appeal decision, which ruled that the Government have acted unlawfully in allowing a genetic maize trial in Devon to go ahead? The Government admitted in court that they had acted unlawfully in dispensing with statutory legal requirements, which the judges called

"a most remarkable and, indeed, regrettable statement".

The implication is that the Government will have to reassess the entire seed list process, affecting up to 163 genetically engineered seed trials across the United Kingdom. It is not possible for the Government to do nothing. They must do something in the light of the court ruling. Given the importance of the matter and its environmental sensitivity, have the Government asked to make a statement? If not, they should have done so.

Madam Speaker: No. Had there been a statement, all hon. Members would have known about it before 1 o'clock today. It would have been on the annunciator. The hon. Gentleman's remarks do not contain the germ of a point of order.

Remission of Third World Debt (Jubilee 2000)

4.26 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for the remission of debt owed by the poorest developing countries by the year 2000.

On 16 May, 70,000 people formed a human chain around the venue for the G8 summit of leading nations in Birmingham, calling for the substantial remission of the unpayable debts of many third-world countries by the end of the year 2000. I was among them, and I spoke as chairman of the all-party group for the Jubilee 2000 coalition, which has 110 members and is almost certainly the largest all-party group in the House.

Also present were other hon. Members from both sides of the House, and many of our noble colleagues in the other place. Members of these Houses were not the focus of attention that day; we simply took our place among the people. There was one exception, when a parliamentarian was mistaken for someone of somewhat exalted status. As the noble Lord Redesdale accompanied Baroness Shirley Williams to the event, he was asked whether he was a member of special branch.

Progress was made on the debt issue at the Birmingham summit. It is thanks to this Government, building on the approach of the previous Government, that such progress was made. There was a new commitment to help post-conflict countries. There was also, for the first time, a declaration of the year 2000 as a target for action on debt. However, we understand that the less enthusiastic members of the G8 successfully blocked more substantial progress. Although we welcome the steps that were taken, there was inevitable disappointment that more was not achieved. The Prime Minister acknowledged to the House the following week that he would have wished to go further.

However, the impact of the human chain was enormous, with coverage in the world's media from *The Washington Post* to *The Nation* in Thailand. As *Newsweek* observed,

"this moral cause has proved itself the people's policy".

The Daily Telegraph commented:

"The approaching millennium does offer the group of leading industrialised countries, all but one of which has a long Christian tradition, the chance of making a dramatic and generous move toward lifting the burden of debt. At Birmingham that opportunity was sadly missed."

Meeting Jubilee 2000's challenge would be generous. However, what those 70,000 people demonstrated was not just the compassion that many of us share for less fortunate individuals in the poorest parts of the world, but the innate common sense that ordinary people show in matters that politicians and officials like to imagine are terribly difficult to understand.

Ordinary people understand debt. They are familiar with mortgages, student loans, credit card limits and negative equity. They realise that, if an individual gets into debt, it is primarily his responsibility to get himself out of it. However, they also know that lenders must share the responsibility for over-lending and over-borrowing. Most of all, they see that, unless the burden of debt is removed from the world's poorest countries, those nations will never be able to enter the virtuous circle of relative prosperity that the rest of the world enjoys.

Keeping those countries poor is not in our interests, any more than it is in theirs. All hon. Members have in their constituencies exporters who wish to find new markets overseas for their goods and services. An open and fair trading relationship between a newly prosperous Africa and the west would be good for us all. Moreover, as long as high debt contributes to deep poverty in the developing world, many of the by-products of that poverty will remain. Whether in the form of civic and ethnic unrest, environmental damage or the movement of refugees across borders, those by-products are problems for our countries to deal with, too.

The Government clearly understand the solid economic argument for debt remission. Last month in the House, the Prime Minister said:

"Our view is that the most persuasive case for more debt relief is that it is only when those countries can escape the burden of their debt that they are able to develop economically. That is not a zero-sum game in which they gain and we lose; on the contrary, it is a game in which we can both win."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 962.]

We must also ensure that, if we cancel much of the debt of the world's poorest countries, we do not leave in place a system that allows that debt to build up in the same way again. That is why, just as we must be tough on those third-world leaders who saddle their people with debt that will have to be paid long after they themselves have gone, so we must ensure that there is no protection for lenders who behave irresponsibly.

That matter is of particular concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells). I pay tribute to the excellent report recently published by the Select Committee on International Development under his chairmanship, and I am grateful for his support as a co-sponsor of the Bill. The other co-sponsors include four other Select Committee Chairmen: the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), Chairman of the Trade and Industry Committee; the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), Chairman of the Treasury Committee; the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee; and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), Chairman of the Agriculture Committee.

We must find a way to impose the disciplines of the market on international lending and borrowing. In this country, if a bank makes a loan that cannot be repaid, the bank knows that it will suffer a loss. That imposes some self-control on the lender. In lending to developing countries, whether by private institutions, G8 Governments or multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and the World bank, there is hardly any such in-built discipline, and it is badly needed. That view was expressed in recent months by George Soros and Milton Friedman, neither of whom could be considered anything but a staunch advocate of the capitalist system.

Another powerful message articulated by the Jubilee 2000 coalition concerns the treatment of Germany in 1953. Germany was granted massive debt relief by the allied powers, who had learnt lessons from the aftermath of the first world war. The allies recognised that Europe would not break out of the cycle of conflict and insecurity unless Germany was to have a fresh economic start.

In 1953, the allies expected their old enemy to spend no more than 5 per cent. of export revenues on debt service. Forty-five years later, under the terms of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, industrial countries are

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insisting that the poorest should spend some 20 per cent. of their revenues on servicing debts, and often much more. Unfortunately, the German Government do not yet take such an enlightened approach to their creditors, and interpret the HIPC initiative in its narrowest and most restrictive sense.

The Bill, which I shall publish in full, speaks for itself. Clause 1 calls on the Government to cancel the unpayable debts of the world's poorest countries by the end of 2000. It defines "unpayable debts" as those that are inconsistent with the OECD poverty reduction targets, to which the Government are firmly committed, and those incurred by clearly corrupt regimes and later inherited by constitutional Governments. It requires the Secretary of State to take reasonable steps to ensure that the new resources released by debt remission are directed towards meeting those poverty reduction targets.

Clause 2 requires the Government, through meetings of the Paris Club creditors and through their representatives on the boards of the International Monetary Fund and the World bank, to urge similar action by other creditors. Clauses 3 and 4 require the Government to be more transparent and open in the information that they release about their own lending, through periodic reports to Parliament, and to seek international agreement for new discipline in lending and borrowing between developing countries and their creditors.

It is vital that pressure for such action is applied in other lending countries, especially strategically important ones and those that act as a block to progress. Jubilee 2000 is active in Germany, where plans for a public event even larger than the Birmingham human chain have been advanced for the G8 summit in Cologne next June. In the United States, too, Jubilee 2000 is strong, and it has gained a foothold in Japan. Signatures for the Jubilee 2000 petition number about 2 million, and are coming in from 40 countries. That number will greatly increase.

Britain must continue to act as a catalyst and a persuader for debt remission by 2000, and it must lead by example. The Bill will ensure that the next millennium begins on the basis of a generous, just and economically rational gesture.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. William Cash, Mr. Donald Anderson, Mr. Frank Cook, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Peter Luff, Mr. Martin O'Neill, Mr. Giles Radice, Mr. Barry Sheerman, Mr. Bowen Wells and Mr. Steve Webb.

REMISSION OF THIRD WORLD DEBT (JUBILEE 2000)

Mr. William Cash accordingly presented a Bill to provide for the remission of debt owed by the poorest developing countries by the year 2000: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Wednesday 22 July, and to be printed [Bill 235].

Opposition Day

[18TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Government and Parliament

Madam Speaker: We come to the first Opposition day debate, and I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.36 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I beg to move,

That this House, reiterating the importance of a strong parliamentary democracy in Britain, deplores the fact that successive governments have increasingly diluted the role of Parliament by making announcements to the media before making them to this House; by undermining the legitimate revising role of the House of Lords; by giving access to lobbyists at a time when the representations of elected Members are dealt with in an increasingly dilatory fashion; by inhibiting the rights of backbenchers to make criticisms of their own side; by encouraging planted supplementary questions which fail to hold the Executive to account; and by responding to questions and arguments with meaningless soundbites and partisan rhetoric instead of constructive answers.

As I am coming up to my 25th anniversary as a Member of this House, this is a good moment to reflect on trends in parliamentary government, but we have not tabled the motion in the belief that there was a golden age from which we have departed. There certainly was not—not in my time, at any rate. When I was first elected, hon. Members wasted incredible amounts of time on voting through the night, which had no effect whatever on the substantive outcome.

Some things have improved in that period—we have a far more extensive and effective Select Committee system, for example—but important boundary lines have been crossed by successive Governments, at heavy cost to the ability of Members of Parliament to represent their constituents. The motion picks out some of them. I say "successive Governments" advisedly, because many of the trends referred to in the motion go back many years. We should never forget the catalogue of misleading of Parliament which was the Scott report. Long though it is, it should still be required reading for anyone who sits in this place, whether as a Member or as a Minister.

After the Scott report, no heads rolled at ministerial or civil service level; indeed, some people on the civil service side went on to high office. There was no lesson for the future and no example made, and a Government with a tiny majority survived censure by one vote. When a Government have a large majority, there is a danger that they will feel immune to risk of censure if they overstep the mark, whether by misleading Parliament, or merely by failing to inform Parliament or failing to take it seriously. Francis Pym pointed that out at the beginning of the Thatcher years, and he was proved right, even in the eyes of many of his colleagues.

The problems and failings set out in our motion are only part of the picture. We have readily co-operated with the Government on reforms that make the House more efficient, and we are pressing for more. We are working with the Government to introduce a series of wider constitutional reforms which we publicly agreed before the election, and which each of our parties put to the people in their manifestos.

We acknowledge that the Leader of the House spends some of her time fighting her corner within the Government on behalf of Parliament, as her role requires. So long as she continues to do that, we shall support her in that effort.

I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement that he will answer fully on Prison Service matters in the House. He is abandoning his predecessor's specious and self-serving attempts to distinguish between policy, for which he accepted some responsibility, and operational matters, for which he accepted no responsibility, despite his habit of getting pretty closely involved in operational matters. In practice, that meant distinguishing between good news and bad news, of which there was plenty. Bad news was always someone else's responsibility, and never the responsibility of the former Home Secretary.

Labour in opposition spent a lot of time denouncing the previous Government's failings in their dealings with Parliament. The Foreign Secretary was notably successful at it, especially in the debates on the Scott report. We would therefore have expected more from the Government. People had not bargained on the extent to which the agenda-setting techniques of opposition and electioneering would be carried into government, often by the same people.

The Government are preoccupied with getting the story they want into the media, if possible to the exclusion of less helpful news. That determines the timetable. They prefer the story to come out in the manner least open to challenge or detailed criticism. To the spin doctor, a leak is far preferable to a statement that is the subject of questions.

Madam Speaker has repeatedly criticised the practice of making announcements outside the House before statements are made and subjected to questioning in the House.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): May I pay tribute to Liberal Democrat spin doctors, who spun a rather anodyne, semi-Euro-sceptic speech by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), in which he moved into mild, anti-European mode? It appeared for three or four days before the speech was made, and the right hon. Gentleman was on radio and television before he gave it. When he made the speech, he got hardly any publicity. I congratulate Liberal Democrats. They are copycatting new Labour media techniques to the very letter.

Mr. Beith: I must disabuse the hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend is not a member of the Government, and was not making a Government announcement. We have to work hard, against the massed ranks of the Government and the Labour party, to ensure that we get into the press. I am glad to say that recycled speeches are part of our general policy on recycling, which is to make use of good material as often as possible. I hope that all my right hon. Friend's speeches are repeated at regular intervals.

I was referring to what Madam Speaker has said about statements of Government policy being made in the House rather than outside it, and being subjected to questioning. She commented on this matter in the previous Parliament in response to my right hon. Friend, now Lord Steel, and she has done so repeatedly in this Parliament. A year ago today, she made a clear statement to the House, in which she said:

"The practice of briefing in advance of a ministerial statement by Whitehall sources or ministerial aides has been current for quite a long time. My impression is that, over the past 20 years, it has progressively developed to the point where the rights of the House are in danger of being overlooked. The House is rightly jealous of its role in holding Ministers to account. If it is to fulfil its function properly, it must be the first to learn of important developments in Government policy. I deprecate most strongly any action taken that tends to undermine this important principle".—[*Official Report*, 21 July 1997; Vol. 298, c. 703.]

She used similar words on 12 February 1998 and on 3 July, when she said:

"I cannot deprecate strongly enough the leaks and the briefings that go on, perhaps behind our backs, in such matters."—[*Official Report*, 3 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 632.]

She has given the Government a clear indication of the position of the House and their obligation to it, but the practice continues.

Last week, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment made a statement about the spending implications of the comprehensive spending review, yet it was not until the weekend that I read in the newspapers about performance-related pay for teachers. That important aspect had been excluded from the statement, but was announced during the weekend.

On Monday, I read in the newspapers that the Government propose an interesting constitutional innovation. They are apparently proposing a European second chamber—a grand House of Euro-Lords—in which members of national Parliaments would assemble to provide a revising chamber for the European Parliament. It is an interesting idea: I do not condemn it out of hand, because it is worth discussing, but, given the Government's view of the House of Lords, it should not do too much revising. We could debate those matters if a policy statement were made to the House. They are certainly significant enough, by a long way, to merit debate in the House.

The Home Secretary's announcement on Boxing day always delights me. I do not know whether hon. Members were safe from their radios and televisions on Boxing day, but I happened to hear that the Home Secretary had written to every bench of magistrates in the country telling them to get tough on football hooligans. That conjures up a picture of the Home Secretary spending Christmas day, when there is no postal collection, writing letters to magistrates all over the country.

It was another of those announcements timed to catch a story on a weak day for news. I do not rate it very highly on my list of statements, because it was not a significant policy, and it did not have much effect. I do not think that magistrates listen to Home Secretaries who tell them what to do in court. Constitutionally, they should not do so. That example shows the way in which decisions about statements are too often being made.

The second issue referred to in our motion is the Government's extraordinary unwillingness to accept the revising role of the House of Lords, which does not augur well for the reform of the second Chamber. At present, the existence of hereditary peers with votes inhibits the Lords from challenging the elected Government on issues that were in the manifesto on which they were elected, and quite rightly so. Challenges from the other place are

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usually on more detailed and less politically partisan matters, on which there are widespread anxieties about what the Government are doing.

In the argument about Scottish university fees for English, Welsh and Northern Irish students, we were faced with an irrational intransigence, and an adamant refusal to contemplate the idea that there could be another point of view. When the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was asked to say that he would not try to reverse the Lords amendments, he said:

"No, I shall not say that . . . The most important reason is that, when an unelected House attempts again and again to overturn the declared will of an elected Chamber, it is always the democratic elected Chamber that must succeed in putting through its policies. . . . we shall overturn the Lords amendment, and, if the Lords send it back to us again, we will overturn it again. That is why this House must always prevail over the unelected House next door."—[*Official Report*, 13 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 132.]

In the end, the Government agreed to include in the Bill a provision for a review, but getting even that concession out of them was like getting blood out of a stone.

There is increasing frustration in the other place at the unwillingness of Ministers to accept advice from a wide range of often expert opinion on matters that are not central to their political programme and did not feature in their election manifesto. For example, the Government refused to accept Lord Ackner's amendment for an advisory body on the criminal justice system, which had extremely widespread support and was not a partisan matter.

Ministers do not seem to like the idea of anyone else, particularly in the Lords but also in Standing Committees considering Bills in this place, having views that should be accommodated. They still seem worried about losing face, which is extraordinary for a Government with such a large majority. Why are they so insecure? What have they got to lose? What is their problem? I wonder whether counselling would help. They seem to have psychological difficulty in admitting that they are wrong, or that someone else may have a point that should be accommodated.

The question will have to be asked repeatedly during the debate on the reform of the House of Lords: do Ministers accept that there should be a revising Chamber or not? Will it be allowed to revise anything when it is eventually reformed?

Another matter that worries people inside and outside Parliament is that lobbyists may be more influential than elected representatives. The issue of formula one tobacco sponsorship left a long shadow, and dancing in the shadows we find Mr. Draper and others, who have glided effortlessly from a political to a lobbying role. Alastair Campbell's deputy has gone straight from government to the Murdoch empire, as corporate communications head of BSkyB.

There is much to be said for the proposal of the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews)—who sits on the Government side—that ministerial advisers should not be allowed to take employment as lobbyists within five years. That proposal is well worth consideration. The Prime Minister's response was that anyone who broke the rules would be out on their ear, but we have yet to see any bodies in Downing street. In any case, some of those causing anxiety are already out in lucrative jobs, and their high salaries may relate to people's belief in their potential influence.

At the same time as lobbyist influence seems to be on the increase, many hon. Members are finding some Departments dilatory or evasive in dealing with their representations. Ministers and Departments vary considerably in that respect. Some Ministers never forget that they, too, are Members of Parliament, and earn brownie points by the trouble they take in responding to Members—and good for them.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): They may soon be Back Benchers.

Mr. Beith: They may well remember that, come the reshuffle, they will be back on the Back Benches.

Those Ministers who do not fall into that "good" category should go into the black book, along with those Ministers who sail past the Members' Entrance on a wet night in a Government car, ignoring the queue of weary colleagues whose votes put them into the car in the first place. There is a definite difference in practice between Ministers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) asked a question to the Department for Education and Employment about disability legislation. The Department failed to reply for three months, so he tabled a question one Friday, asking when the Department intended to reply. The Department rang him up and asked him to withdraw the question, saying that it would make an announcement the following Monday. As a matter of courtesy, he did so. The Department then released the contents of its reply to the media on that very Friday, but only to Parliament on the Monday. That taught my hon. Friend to be helpful and responsive to Ministers.

I used to find that parliamentary questions were answered within 10 to 14 days. Looking through the questions on my desk recently, I noticed that I tabled one on 1 June which was not answered until 15 July. Perhaps that was because it was about the political composition of appointees to health trusts in the north-east of England, but it took the Department long enough to find out fairly readily available figures. I have never made it my habit to put down a named day for answer to a question unless I have some reason to want it on that day. However, I have discovered that most Members now find that that is the only way to get an answer within a reasonable period.

None of the problems I have described are peculiar to the present Government. They did not begin in May last year, but they should not be continuing if the Government intend to reform the matters.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The right hon. Gentleman did just say that he was used to getting answers fairly quickly, and that it was only recently that he had not.

Mr. Beith: Practice in some Departments has deteriorated recently, and needs to be looked at carefully.

When it comes to securing the compliance of Back Benchers in asking grovelling questions, the previous Government tried as well. They had their grovellers, especially at Prime Minister's questions. I remember the

former Member for Welwyn and Hatfield, who used to go on about "that lot over there"; the Labour party is now on the other side, and he is somewhere else now. The difference is that the present Government, so far, are much better at it.

The Tories could not keep it up. They had some doughty rebels, such as the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) on the Scott report, and the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack)—who is now on the Front Bench—stood out on a few matters of principle in his time, and I commend him for it. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) has made a political career out of rebelling. The Tories have had their anti-grovellers as well. Indeed, they had such a fundamental division over Europe that there were a whole run of hostile questions that they could not resist in any case.

Why do a Government with a huge majority—and a Government who claim broad unity within the party in carrying out their election programme—feel so insecure that they must keep everyone on message around the clock? What does that do for effective parliamentary scrutiny? Some of the most useful and constructive criticism of Government policy could come from Members with relevant experience on the Government side.

We all remember the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) asking Madam Speaker whether it was all right to ask an awkward question, even if it might embarrass the Government or the party. We also remember vividly the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) asking:

"Does the Prime Minister recall that, when we were in opposition, we used to groan at the fawning, obsequious, softball, well-rehearsed and planted questions asked by Conservative Members of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)?"

He asked the Prime Minister to

"distinguish his period in office by discouraging such practices"

and to encourage

"without fear or favour, and without showing partiality or affection—loyal Labour Back Benchers who wish to seek and provide scrutiny and accountability in this place?"—[*Official Report*, 3 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 358-359.]

That is a legitimate and proper role.

So large is the number of new Labour Members that the Government have brought on to their own side experience in all sorts of walks of life, which can be a reasonable source of constructive and sensible criticism of what they are doing—criticism which they should invite and encourage, and to which they should listen. However, the duty Whip is always there with the book, noting down whether contributions have been helpful or unhelpful. I see that the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) has her pen at the ready. Where is that information taken? The remedy lies in the hands of hon. Members.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I have agreed almost wholly with the right hon. Gentleman so far. However, previous Whips did not need to write things down. They had various vocabularies which they employed outside the Chamber when the relevant moment arose.

Mr. Beith: Indeed. I have overheard many such conversations in my time. As a former Chief Whip, I could never equal them, given my sheltered life.

Labour Members do not need to accept and knuckle under to that level of discipline. Nor is it necessary to sustain their Government and their party in office, given the size of the majority. Their constituents will not thank them for it either, and their ability to suffer bad years—and bad election years—may be significantly affected if they are shown to be able to deliver constructive and sensible criticism from time to time.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): In my right hon. Friend's experience—which is longer than that of any of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Chamber—has there ever been a time when a Government member who dissented immediately became at risk of deselection, or of not being re-selected? Therefore, hon. Members' liberty to speak out—the purpose of being sent here—is qualified in a way that I have not seen in previous Parliaments.

Mr. Beith: With an extraordinary sense of anticipation, my hon. Friend draws my attention to a quote that I have with me from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). He said:

"I cannot support my party in the Lobby tonight because I have not heard a convincing argument to satisfy me and enable me to do so. I would, in the more liberal times that prevailed in my party before the election, have joined the Liberal Democrats in the Lobby in support of their amendment, which comes closest to my own views but, as Labour Members know, shortly before the election, the standing orders of the Labour party were changed so that to vote against a Labour Government is now an offence against those standing orders and leads to withdrawal of the Whip and"—

this is my hon. Friend's point—

"debarment from further candidature."

I wonder what he had in mind. The hon. Gentleman added:

"One might think that an overreaction, given that we have the largest majority since 1935".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 398.]

That underlines my point.

The problem of soundbite politics is still with us, although I thought that things might improve following the change in Prime Minister's questions. Personally, I was sympathetic to what the Leader of the House did in at least trying a longer period in which it might be possible to follow questions through with related supplementaries. I did not share the criticisms of those who said that the right hon. Lady was somehow diminishing the rights of Parliament by that action. It may have suited the Prime Minister's convenience—with his singularly low attendance at Divisions in the House—to concentrate all on one day. However, I genuinely believe that it was worth a try, and that it may still be made to work effectively.

The change has not got rid of the time-wasting partisanship, and Prime Minister's questions has become a fairly stilted occasion—just as the previous twice-weekly occasion had become. The change seemed to offer the prospect of a more systematic scrutiny, but has hardly done so. That is not the fault of the half-hour slot; it is the habit of uninstructive partisan exchanges which so characterised the dying days of the last Parliament and have reasserted themselves, quite inappropriately, in this.

Too many ministerial responses are meaningless put-downs which would never be accepted at a normal public meeting. If one went to a public meeting in my

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constituency—or any other constituency—and tried to use the same put-down expressions, one would get a severe reaction. The cry would be, "Answer the question. We did not come here to be insulted. We came here to ask questions and to get answers to them." That principle ought to hold in this House.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): As a new Member of Parliament, I am conscious of the need for quality debate in this House. Will the right hon. Gentleman recognise that a key ingredient of that is the quality of opposition, and that, while we get the drivel and partisanship of an on-message, off-policy Opposition, the quality of debate in the House will not improve?

Mr. Beith: Some of my criticisms are levelled in that direction, but the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues must lead by example. If the Government get daft questions, that does not stop them giving rather more sensible answers which illustrate the paucity of the original question, rather than responding in kind. I can say that with reasonable objectivity because most of the gibes to which I refer were directed at the official Opposition.

The record of our debates shows that certain formulae recur again and again. There is a wonderful one which goes, "We will take no lessons". That is the Government's slogan: it should be written over their beds. The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs said:

"We will take no lessons from the Opposition about commitments to community pharmacists."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1988; Vol. 315, c. 1124.]

The Prime Minister said:

"The Foreign Secretary does not require lessons on how to be the Foreign Secretary. It is the Leader of the Opposition who requires lessons on how to be the Leader of the Opposition."—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 367.]

[Interruption.] They love it. When I repeat the phrases, Labour Members cheer. It is meat and drink to them.

The Prime Minister also said the Government did not "need any lessons" from the Conservative Opposition about the protection of the green belt. The hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said:

"I am very interested in what the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) said, but I do not need to take lessons from the Liberal Party."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 1997; Vol. 302, c. 58.]

Where do they get such phraseology? A Government who are never prepared to learn lessons from anybody will one day come a serious cropper. It is at least conceivable that from the official Opposition Front Bench there will come from time to time suggestions to which the Government should listen. I assert that such suggestions also emanate from Liberal Democrat Members and from Labour Back Benchers. The repetition of the formula shows that the thought process has stopped, and the formula has taken over.

When the Conservatives were in power, the line was "the winter of discontent", and hardly anything could be said without reference to that event of 20 years before. It happened before some hon. Members left school, but the phrase was reiterated in question after question. When we mentioned electoral reform issues to the Home Secretary, he said that we were against such reform in 1923. That is not strictly accurate, and it certainly does not apply to any of us in the House today. I expected someone to shout, "Munich," at the Conservative Front Bench, or to say, "Zinoviev," to Labour Members, not having discovered that the Zinoviev letter was a forgery. Such phrases go on and on, long after the expiry of their shelf life.

If Parliament is not visibly influencing events, the descent into partisan rhetoric may in part be a response to frustration. We are in danger of being turned into fans in a stadium, corralled in our team seats, shouting insultingly framed advice to those on the pitch, and organising the equivalent of the Mexican wave to provide the appropriate response to whatever is being said. Politics is a spectator sport, with salaries for the spectators, and, rather like football hooligans, they play to the cameras as well.

Madam Speaker has criticised the habit that grew up, and which seems to have been discarded, of hon. Members cheering when the leaders of their parties entered the Chamber. It was interesting to note that, once a year, that did not happen. That was on the day when television cameras were not here because we assembled in the morning before the state opening. When the Conservative and Labour leaders came in, one could have heard a pin drop. It was an occasion staged for the cameras, and all part of turning us into a kind of spectator sport. There must be a better way to run a Parliament.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): From my experience and practice, I work on the assumption that we should freely express our views in the House, always bearing in mind that we were elected not as independents but as party politicians. I was a Labour candidate, and had I not stood as such, I would not have been elected. Therefore, I have to balance my responsibilities to my party with my view that this is a free House.

Is there not an air of hypocrisy about this matter? How often do Liberal Democrat Members disagree among themselves in the Chamber? Unless they agree on all the important issues, which is unlikely, it is likely that they have disagreements upstairs or in the constituencies and do not express them in the House. Do not let us be too hypocritical, and become holier than holy.

Mr. Beith: The hon. Gentleman must recognise that what I have said is addressed to the House as a whole. We are challenging hon. Members to change the way that this place operates.

I do not deny for a moment the importance to the hon. Gentleman of being a Labour Member and wishing to express and support his party's views. I appreciate his pleasure at the fact that a Labour Government are in power. However, I know that there are areas in which he disagrees with the Government, and he is one hon. Member from whom I occasionally hear that. There are many others from whom I do not hear even the most guarded, careful and constructive criticism of what the Government are doing, at times when such comments could usefully influence the Government.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): To show that some of us are not holier than holy, may I say that I sometimes disagree with my right hon. Friend? I draw his attention to the fact that the frequent Government rhetoric about not taking any lessons from the Opposition is designed to cover the fact

that the Government are taking lessons from the Opposition. An example was the Home Secretary eating his words about getting rid of privatised prisons.

Mr. Beith: I fear that that trend developed in the run-up to the election, when they were all on the same message and used the same language about crime. In some cases, they protest too much, because there is agreement and they wish to emphasise disagreement.

We are challenging the Government and hon. Members in all parts of the House to try to reverse some of those trends. It will not be enough simply to rely on good will and good intentions. Reform and modernisation must build in safeguards to ensure that Parliament can hold the Executive to account, and that laws and regulations are not merely pushed through this place but revised and modified to meet concerns that have been expressed through the democratic process on behalf of the people who will be affected.

Some steps have been taken. They include a resolution of the House on ministerial accountability, which is referred to in the Government's amendment. That amendment is characterised not by matters on which I disagree, but simply by complacency, and I challenge the Government to do rather better.

Other steps include the determination of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs not to be denied information that it needed to carry out its work of scrutiny. I welcome that, but the Committee had to fight hard for it. Another was the first steps towards a logical system of programming the discussion of Bills. There is still a long way to go to make that system work properly, but we have supported the Government in taking the first steps along that road.

Let us have more major reforms that can help to safeguard Parliament's position. More use of Special Standing Committees was shamefully abandoned after being introduced by the previous Government. Those Committees enabled witnesses to be heard before we started the detailed consideration of Bills. There could be more use of pre-legislative examination of Bills. Constitutional Bills could be examined partly in Committee and not wholly on the Floor of the House, where much time is taken up by repetitive argument and not enough is spent ensuring that a Bill's details are right. A price will be paid for that in Scotland and Wales, because there was insufficient scrutiny of some of the detail of the relevant Bills.

Why cannot Parliament sit more evenly through the year, and not disappear for nearly three months at this time of year? I think that the Executive like it that way. They are delighted to get rid of us, and there will be a sense of relief in Departments when we have dispersed, but that is not a good way to ensure that the Executive are held continuously to account.

We could have a system like the Australian main committee system, which extends the scope for Chamber-type activity to give more opportunities for ministerial policy statements to be questioned and for Select Committee reports to be debated. Of course, the biggest parliamentary reform would be to get rid of artificial majorities and give parties no more and no less strength than the voters had accorded them, but on that the British people will decide.

5.7 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'notes that members of the Government are present daily in both Houses, putting forward the case for the Government's legislative and financial proposals and being held to account for its policies and actions; welcomes the all-party support for the establishment of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and the endorsement by the House of key proposals to make Parliament more effective and efficient; notes that more statements have been made by ministers this session than in the equivalent period in 1992–93, and that Cabinet ministers have given oral evidence to select committees on more occasions than the average for the past seven sessions; and believes that the Government has lived up to both its manifesto commitment and the 19 March 1997 resolution on ministerial accountability.

I welcome this debate in the way that I always welcome debates on matters pertaining to the House. It is the third debate on parliamentary matters on Opposition days in almost as many weeks. We are pleased to be here, and I can understand why Opposition Members are keeping away from policy issues, especially after our comprehensive spending review announcement last week. I cannot say that the topic for debate has gripped the House's attention. If attendance is an indicator of concern about the way in which the Government relate to the House, it should be noted that about 25 per cent. of Liberal Members are present and that the Opposition Back Benches are empty. I congratulate the Conservative spokesmen, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) on being here. With such a poorly attended debate, it cannot be said that the motion gives rise to massive concern.

The Liberal motion and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) both proclaim:

"A plague o' both your houses",

although he has acknowledged that there are some important issues that we should all take on board and talk about.

Perhaps I can start with two points of agreement. First, although some people think that there was a golden age, there has never been one. There has never been a cocooned situation, with Parliament acting in a vacuum and the press and people outside never asking any questions of politicians, other than those that were asked in the House. That is probably a good thing. Secondly, I agree with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed when he implies that the low point in the relationship between Government and Parliament was probably at the time of the Scott report. That is a fair point and I think that everyone, in all parties, has to learn from that.

I should like to take each of the items in the Liberal motion and set the record straight on some of those before going on to other points.

Mr. Maclennan: I think that the right hon. Lady is a very courteous Leader of the House, but may I ask her to set an example by referring to my party by its actual name? She persistently refers to us as the Liberal party and she must know that that is not the party that is represented on these Benches. There is a Liberal party, but it is not in this House.

Mrs. Taylor: I am happy to be corrected. Perhaps I am displaying my age in remembering the fact that, when the

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right hon. Gentleman was in the Labour party with me, a Liberal party existed on those Benches, but I shall try harder and try to recall the words "Liberal Democrats", even though it is sometimes difficult to use them in certain circumstances.

The first accusation in the motion is that the Government are making too many announcements in the media before making them to the House. There is more pressure now. I think that it has built up over the past decade. Broadcasters are trying all the time to put pressure on to get stories in advance. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed acknowledged that. He said that the pressure had built up during the time of the previous Administration. I think that that is true, but I also think that we all have responsibilities to get the balance right in informing the House where appropriate and in giving the wider picture to the press as necessary.

We all have one problem in common—try getting any issue on to the "Today" programme if it is something that happened the day before. That programme and others of that ilk are interested only in speculating about what might or might not happen—I am glad to see hon. Members agreeing. That is one of the difficulties: people are trying to anticipate the parliamentary agenda.

I remind the House what the ministerial code says on that matter:

"the most important announcements of Government policy should be made, in the first instance, in Parliament."

That is the code that we try to stick by. It does not, of course, stop Ministers talking in advance about the issue, the background and the problems that have led to any change in policy.

Time and again, I have heard Ministers being pressed to go further when they have been interviewed on the "Today" programme, resisting revealing their conclusions, but being willing to set the scene, not least because, if they did not, we would probably hear the view of an Opposition spokesperson or someone from another party and no one would have put the other point of view. Judgments have to be made on that basis every day. It is important that we remember the basic rule and that Ministers, when setting the scene for a statement, do not overstep the mark and give away details that should first be revealed to the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The right hon. Lady is right to quote the principle, but may I ask her to reflect, for example, on the past week? It was clear that a series of statements were to be made in the House by Ministers following the comprehensive spending review, and we all knew in advance what the order of ministerial statements would be. Clearly, by that definition, they were important, yet, on almost every occasion, many of the details of the statement that was made here at 3.30 pm were, in precise terms, in the press that morning and so the subject of discussion on radio and television.

Can the right hon. Lady say to us with any clarity that there has not been pre-briefing in the past week on almost every occasion by the Government? Given that it is obvious to the country that there has been, will she give an undertaking that she, on behalf of the Government, will ensure that, when we know that a statement is going to be made, no information will be given to any of the press about its contents until it is announced here? Then we could all be on the "Today" programme the next day, or not at all, but the "Today" programme would have to follow Parliament, not Parliament follow the blessed "Today" programme.

Mrs. Taylor: I should never have thought of the hon. Gentleman as naive, but I have no confidence that his last suggestion would be followed by anyone. It would be wrong for Ministers to give details of important statements on the "Today" programme, but, as I have said, it is appropriate on occasions to give background briefing. Certainly, with regard to the comprehensive spending review, an awful lot of what was being talked about was in the document that was produced at the time and in the departmental press releases in response to parliamentary questions, which were out on Tuesday. However, many people did not look at the detail until the individual Ministers came to the Dispatch Box and made their wider announcements. It is important that we get the balance right, and much effort goes into doing so.

Mr. Beith: I want to make this clear. In concentrating on the "Today" programme, the right hon. Lady is in danger of forgetting where much of this is happening. A lot of it is briefing by advisers—indeed, Madam Speaker has referred to that—to newspapers. If a Minister is on a programme and he goes too far, we all know that he has overstepped the mark and the criticism can be made. The problem arises when the information has come out, usually to the written media, in the days preceding a statement, and probably because of advisers rather than Ministers.

Mrs. Taylor: Exactly the same principles must apply in terms of scene setting and background information, but no inappropriate disclosures should be made outwith the House.

Mr. MacShane: Does my hon. Friend recall an all-night sitting when there was an earnest debate on corporal punishment and we all had to stay until six o'clock in the morning? We all opened, I think, *The Independent* and read a speech by a Liberal Democrat spokesman, which was printed in the paper because he had sent out a press release. The only problem was that he had not made the speech. Is there any greater contempt of Parliament than hon. Members pre-press releasing their speech and not even turning up to make it?

Mrs. Taylor: I remember that debate and the points of order. The whole text of that speech could have been read to the House from the newspaper before the Liberal Democrat Member had opened his mouth. That was an interesting situation, which fortunately does not happen too often. Perhaps that is because the House does not sit that late so often. Perhaps if we had more late sittings of that sort, we would have more breaches of the convention.

It is true that the Government are making many announcements and that there are many changes in the policy pursued by the previous Government. It is right that we should be making many announcements and changes in policy because, after all, that is what the electorate voted for. In fact, the Government have been making statements to the House more frequently than their predecessors. If we look at the numbers of oral

statements per sitting day, at the moment, we are ahead of what other Governments have done. There are occasions when I have to advise colleagues against making a statement on certain days.

Occasionally, usually by agreement, there have been statements on Opposition days; it happened once following a private notice question from the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, on a Conservative Opposition day. Such statements have usually been by agreement and we are grateful if other parties feel it appropriate to give up their time because we try to respect the convention.

It would have been tempting to look at all the cases where the previous Government scuppered Opposition days by having statements. We are not saving up major announcements in order to destroy Opposition debates. Ministers have been very forthcoming. For example, I recall that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister came to the House at 10 o'clock one evening because he thought it right that the House should be informed, at the earliest possible moment, of an important development on the channel tunnel rail link. Such instances show how seriously Ministers take the House.

The second charge in the motion is that we are

"undermining the legitimate revising role of the House of Lords".

It is the most puzzling of the charges because I am not sure what the Liberal Democrats are saying. Is it that the Government must accept every amendment from the House of Lords? It is clearly not, as that would be daft. It is not undermining the revising role of the House of Lords to disagree with some of its amendments.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Since the Government came into power, on how many occasions have they accepted amendments from the House of Lords?

Mrs. Taylor: There have been more than 2,000 amendments to Government legislation, many of which resulted from the Government taking away and redrafting defective amendments, including some from the other place, because we accepted them in principle. A recent example is an amendment relating to parish councillors serving as school governors. Following amendments and representations in the other place, the Government took the matter away and came back with a technically correct amendment.

It is legitimate to assess each defeat in the House of Lords on the basis of the merits of the case and the importance of our original stance, and then determine whether the amendment is an important, constructive revision or one designed not to improve legislation, but to show simple points of disagreement.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does the right hon. Lady acknowledge that, had the Government's proposals for the reform of the House of Lords proceeded to phase 1—that is, all hereditary peers were removed—the Government's defeat on Scottish tuition fees would still have happened? Would she still say that the Government could not accept that amendment, even from their reformed House of Lords?

Mrs. Taylor: I was not referring to that particular amendment. I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Is it that, with a reformed Chamber with no hereditary peers, this House should always give way to it?

Mr. Tyler: No.

Mrs. Taylor: Therefore, the hon. Gentleman has no case. Each amendment must be looked at on its merits and the Government of the day have to make an assessment. I am beginning to wonder whether the Liberals of today are less radical than they were in 1910, when they first talked about reform of the House of Lords. I recall that when we debated the role of the House of Lords in the Joint Committee, before the last general election, there was no doubt in Liberal minds that the House of Commons must always be the primary Chamber. That is an important principle. As a Chamber, we are entitled to insist on having a particular amendment or on not accepting an amendment from the other place. However, there may be consequences such as delay or what we call ping-pong between the two Chambers.

The third point in the motion relates to giving access to lobbyists. Again, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made complaints that I do not believe stand up when we examine the details. It was unwise of him to highlight recent accusations, especially those in *The Observer*. That newspaper made three accusations, the first being that there had been some Government involvement in the leaking of a Select Committee report. That was a serious allegation and it was important to examine it, and that happened very quickly.

The right hon. Gentleman should know, because it is now clearly in the public domain, that the Select Committee report in question was available on an embargoed basis on Monday 8 June. It was the fifth report on energy policy. A Jonathan McShane, who works for GJW, signed for an embargoed copy of that report. That company allegedly breached the embargo and certain actions have been taken following that. There has been no suggestion of any Government involvement and it is important that that is acknowledged.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the right hon. Lady agree that it would be far better if no embargoed copies were given to lobbyists?

Mrs. Taylor: I think that the incident in question will cause the House to ask questions about who should get embargoed copies. The security surrounding those copies is not all that great. However, it is our practice that anyone who has given evidence to a Select Committee has access to that Committee's report. In future, we must be careful about how we exercise that practice. Of course, journalists also have access to embargoed copies and, in view of what has happened, the House may want to review its practice.

The House is aware that people need to have proper information, which brings us back to the balancing problem, which was mentioned earlier, of how we give people proper information without them then breaching the embargo.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the early publication of the draft

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Bill on freedom of information would do more than any other single act to restore and improve the relationships between Government, Parliament and the public? As Chairman of the Select Committee on Public Administration, I can tell her that we were grateful to be given copies today—within the two-months deadline—of the Government's response to the Select Committee's comments on the White Paper, "Your right to know". Will she assure the House that, in line with signs from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the accompanying letter, the Government will be able to publish the draft Bill in late September for further scrutiny?

Mrs. Taylor: It is still our intention to publish that draft Bill, and I shall come to the subject of draft Bills later. I hope that publishing the White Paper was a sign of good faith. We are grateful for the work that my hon. Friend's Select Committee has done on it.

I want briefly to deal with the two other allegations in the motion, as we need to ensure that they are on the record. There was a suggestion that the Mansion House speech had been leaked. *The Observer* called the information that was supposed to have been leaked "gold dust". If so, it was fool's gold because it was a fantasy leak—those items were not even in the speech. The other information in that article did not stand up either.

In case the Liberals—[HON. MEMBERS: "Liberal Democrats."] Yes. If the Liberal Democrats want to talk further about lobbyists, I must remind them that the famous McNally amendment in the other place was, as we learned recently, written by lobbyists. I was not aware of that until I saw an article in *The Independent* on 7 July. The legislative officer for the National Federation of Retail Newsagents was quoted as saying:

"Along with the Telegraph and the Guardian we had been LOBBYING the Government ourselves over the Bill . . . A firm we use as consultants (Charles Barker) suggested that we speak to the Liberal Democrats and we did that. We were introduced to Lord McNally and he agreed to table an amendment to the Bill. Charles Barker helped us in drafting a possible amendment."

I will not say that we will not take lessons from the Liberal Democrats because I have been told not to do that. However, all hon. Members must be extremely careful about what they say. Lobbyists can play both legitimate and illegitimate roles. We have to be careful that we do not throw mud and simply accept what is in *The Observer* or anywhere else when real issues have to be examined, not only by the House but by others.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I think that the Leader of the House will agree that if lobbying organisations—acting on behalf of, for example, the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association—were never allowed to supply amendments to hon. Members, much current legislation would not have been enacted. Lobbying has to happen. However, as she rightly said, we have to ensure that lobbying is regulated and that, in many cases, it does not entail financial implications for the Government or civil servants.

Mrs. Taylor: The point I was making is that people should not be self-righteous about it.

There have been problems with correspondence from Ministers, but the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and other hon. Members will know that I have taken action to try to improve the situation. It is true that, in some Departments, the volume of correspondence has increased significantly—something that, I am told, happens after every general election—but we shall soon be publishing information on the volume of correspondence, targets for responding and the percentage of replies that have been sent within those targets.

As for inhibiting the rights of Back Benchers, I do not think that, with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) sitting alongside me, I have to say any more. I do not think that he feels particularly inhibited. However, we will make no apologies for being a well-disciplined party. Moreover, I think that the electorate will appreciate the fact that Labour Members are happy to support the Government. We all know the difficulties that the previous Administration experienced because they were so riven by indecision. As has been said, a lot of mythology has grown up around inhibiting rights.

I am not sure whether the Liberal Democrats are saying that only hon. Members who disagree with Government policy should ask questions. However, I think that Labour Members are perfectly entitled to welcome Government policy, if that is what they want. I also remind the House that Government Back Benchers are in a particularly difficult position. The fact is that 325 Labour Back Benchers are competing for chances to participate at Question Time. Moreover, in debates, they are competing on an equal basis for a chance to speak with a much smaller number of Opposition Back Benchers. Therefore, if Opposition Members want changes in the House's procedure, perhaps we should consider allowing Government Back Benchers—because of their number—to ask two supplementary questions for every one from Opposition Members.

I had some examples to share of meaningless soundbites and partisan rhetoric, but—as the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed has given us enough examples of his own—I shall not do so.

I do not want to take too much time for my speech, as other hon. Members want to speak. However, I should say that I regret that the Liberal Democrats have not used their motion today to welcome some of the Modernisation Committee's changes, particularly on programming. A Government with our majority could have imposed guillotines on every single Bill without taking into account the wishes of any other party. However, we have adopted a less confrontational approach, and tried to proceed by agreement. I sometimes think that we have proceeded too much by agreement in dealing with the Liberal Democrats.

The House will recall that the Government were happy to consider on the Floor of the House the main clauses—dealing with the Bill's principle—of the Government of Wales Bill and to consider its remaining clauses in Committee, as happens with the Finance Bill. However, as the official Opposition are so fixated with the idea that Committee stages should be taken on the Floor of the House, we reluctantly agreed, through the usual channels, to consider that Bill in that manner. It was hardly arrogance on our part to agree to do that.

I hope that we shall be able to deal with other legislation in other ways. However, not only the Government but Opposition Members have to be accommodating on those matters. We can proceed by agreement only if other parties will meet us halfway.

I wish that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed had mentioned Euro-scrutiny, and the very good report from the Modernisation Committee—with the backing of the Select Committee on European Legislation—that improves the House's scrutiny of what is happening in Europe. The report is a big step forward and should be acknowledged.

We have in some cases extended the remit of Select Committees, and, when requested, given them Sub-Committees. More Cabinet Ministers are appearing before more Select Committees than ever before. We have established the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege and have taken other, similar action.

Governments, and Ministers, occasionally make mistakes. If a mistake is made, it is right that we should offer an apology—which the House is usually very willing to accept. However, I do not accept that there are significant and real problems. As I said at the beginning of my speech, there has been no golden age. If each hon. Member is to try to improve Parliament's position and role, we shall all have to work together and be willing to consider how the House operates. The House cannot merely make more demands of Government.

We can be proud of the Government's record in responding to the House's needs. We are trying to lead the way in modernisation, to consolidate that relationship. Although there will always be a healthy tension between Government and Parliament, we have to maintain a proper working relationship, and that is what Ministers are trying to achieve.

5.36 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Both the Leader of the House and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) talked about there being no golden age. I suppose that it would be truer to say that each one of us has his or her own golden age, when things were really splendid. However, I think that we all agree that it would be very difficult to come across a shared golden age.

When the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made his speech—very felicitously, as he always does—my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) whispered to me, "I wonder if he would have made that speech when he was Chief Whip of the Liberal party?" As the Leader of the House made her speech, I could not help but wonder whether she would have made that speech had she still been on the Opposition Front Bench and Conservative Members had still been on the Treasury Bench. The answers to the questions are, of course, "No, he wouldn't," and "No, she wouldn't."

We have had in this debate some interesting observations and information from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. The fact that the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) is not a member of the Government came somewhat as a surprise to Conservative Members.

I must also confess that I was slightly disappointed when I was told about the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed—whom I always think of as a friend—and his Boxing day television. If one has to watch politics on television on Boxing day, one really has been driven to some form of extreme.

There is a serious subtext to this debate. I should refer the House to an interview that was reported, in March 1998, in *The Sunday Times*, in which the Minister without Portfolio was quoted. He said:

"It may be that the era of pure representative democracy is coming to an end."

He went on to discuss the role that

"plebiscites, focus groups, lobbies, citizens movements and the internet will have on replacing Westminster democracy".

It was a chilling message.

I suspect that feelings that have been enunciated many times in recent months about such messages perhaps prompted the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and other Liberal Democrat Members, very wisely, to choose the subject for today's debate. It was certainly because we were concerned on that front that we chose this general subject, focusing on Select Committees, for a Supply day debate a couple of weeks ago. I should like to go through the motion, as both the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and the Leader of the House have, and to make a few observations.

The motion refers to the making of announcements. The Leader of the House tried to gloss over that, but should not have done so. Within a week of the beginning of this Parliament in May last year, at least three announcements fulfilled the criteria about which she has just told the House: significant changes in policy should be announced on the Floor of the House. If the announcement on the Bank of England was not a significant change of policy, I do not know what is.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The House was not sitting at the time.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The Chancellor needed to have waited only two days—and could have done so. The fact that he did not showed a trend.

It was a pity—I put it no higher than that—that the Leader of the House did not announce on the Floor of the House the change to Prime Minister's Question Time, which has not helped the parliamentary process. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady's parliamentary private secretary, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall), is very good at making sedentary interventions. I understand his frustration because, once upon a time, I was a PPS. He is deeply frustrated because he feels passionately about matters and wants to have a go—God bless him—but is not supposed to say anything. It is a pity that the change to Prime Minister's Question Time was not debated in the House. I remind the right hon. Lady of the Modernisation Committee's undertaking to consider and assess the matter. I very much hope that, in assessing it, she will take the feeling of the House, as she has properly on other issues. The change has not been a good one; I suspect that many colleagues in all parties share that view.

Let us consider the announcement, to great fanfares—literally—of the change to an ethical foreign policy. Of course, I would not subscribe to the view that we had an unethical foreign policy in the past, but for the

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

Government, the change was great and should have been announced on the Floor of the House.

The motion refers to

"undermining the legitimate revising role of the House of Lords".

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made some pertinent points about that, but the Leader of the House, who is a fair-minded person and enjoys wide respect in the House, did not really meet them. I saw in one of the daily newspapers recently that a Downing street aide was reported as having said:

"Peers are sent to do a job and that job is to represent the party not snub the Prime Minister. We'll be more careful who we appoint in future."

That is pretty sinister. We are told that we are to do away at a stroke with hereditary peers, yet no proper coherent plan for a second Chamber has been put before the House. The Government have embarked on a major constitutional change without telling us of the destination, which some of us would quite like to know. It is very bad for democracy if newly appointed life peers are being sent to the House of Lords with such a remit. The House of Lords has a legitimate revising role, and it is important that it should be able to say, "Think again."

When I sat on the Government Benches, I was one of those who were strongly opposed to the War Crimes Bill. I was delighted when the House of Lords took action. It was entirely constitutionally proper for the Government and the Prime Minister, now Baroness Thatcher, to override the House of Lords, but it was equally proper for the House of Lords to tell us to think again. It was very unwise of the then Prime Minister to ignore that warning.

Mrs. Taylor: I do not want to take issue with the hon. Gentleman on the constitutional position, but he must agree that, although it is right that this Chamber should consider what the House of Lords says, we have the right to say whether we accept its advice. Nothing should be automatic. By rejecting any Lords amendment, we are not undermining the principle of a revising Chamber.

Sir Patrick Cormack: No, but there should not be automatic repudiation of the House of Lords actions. I am afraid that that is what has happened. The majority in this House should not be used as a steamroller to crush sensible amendments, such as that to the Teaching and Higher Education Bill, concerning Scottish universities, which was recently sent back to the House of Lords a couple of times. Although there is nothing between the right hon. Lady and me on our understanding of constitutional doctrine, the application of that doctrine and the high-handed way in which the House of Lords has been regarded over the past year is deeply disturbing. This country would not be well served either by a unicameral system or by a second Chamber of placemen and appointees. It is terribly important that an independent element has the opportunity to say to us, with its wisdom and experience, "Think again." *[Interruption.]* The PPS, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, is at it again.

We should bear it in mind that their lordships do not have our constituency responsibilities; they have more time to think and reflect than we do. There is therefore an opportunity for them to say to us, "Look, you haven't got it quite right." I think that that was behind the part of the Liberal Democrat motion concerning the House of Lords. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed was entirely right to make the point, and the Leader of the House should think a little more carefully about her response.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman and I may not agree on every iota of policy on a second Chamber, but I share his implied frustration. One of the reasons often given for criticising a Lords amendment is that it comes from the House of Lords—referring implicitly, and often explicitly, to the make-up of the second Chamber. Its configuration is such because Governments of both main parties since the war have allowed that to be so. The Government are going to change that. The amendment on tuition fees would have been agreed without the votes of hereditary peers. We are all willing to listen to an alternative view; we should not rubbish those who put it. Until the House of Lords is changed, their lordships have as much right to put their point of view without being rubbished as we have to put ours.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The amendment would have been agreed without the support of not only hereditary peers but Conservative peers. There was a majority of non-Conservative peers on that issue.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed talked about lobbyists, and the Leader of the House sought to reply, making some reasonable points. We should all be very concerned about the growing power and influence of lobbyists. We in this Chamber should be the lobbyists. We are sent here by our constituents, who have the legitimate right to expect us to lobby and put forward points of view on their behalf—even if we must dissociate ourselves from such points—in order to ensure that they are appropriately and adequately considered in Government circles.

The accretion of power to lobbyists and the deluge of their paper into our offices every day performs a disservice to the democratic process that we must address. The Leader of the House was gracious enough to acknowledge that when she spoke of embargoed reports. We must look at the code of conduct governing lobbyists. I hope that we shall have an opportunity in the reasonably near future specifically to debate that subject.

The motion refers to

"inhibiting the rights of backbenchers".

Let me draw the attention of the House—hon. Members in the Labour party will, of course, have received this missive—to a letter sent out by the Chief Whip and quoted in the press on 18 August 1997. He wrote:

"Dear colleague,

I am circulating to every member of the Parliamentary Labour Party the extract from the Labour Party rule book which deals with membership conditions and the national disciplinary rules. In particular, can I draw your attention to rule 2a, 8, which states that no member shall engage in a sustained course of conduct prejudicial, or detrimental, to the party?"

That is fair enough up to a point, but no party machine should seek to snuff out the independence of Members of Parliament. I am delighted to see in the Chamber the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who is a loyal

member of his party. He is not afraid to express dissent when he feels that his party is going wrong on particular issues.

Mr. Mackinlay: Do me a favour. Call me a dirty swine.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I used to have praise heaped on me when I spoke against the poll tax, so it is rather fun to get my own back. The hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and several others are those whom new Members should take as exemplars.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed talked about the planting of supplementaries. That is not new, or unique to the Government, but my attention has been drawn to the activities of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs who was caught drafting questions for Labour Members. He wrote to the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence), urging her to table a question on carbon monoxide poisoning, and suggesting precise wording. He added:

"I can assure you of a helpful response which your local paper may be interested in when I respond to you on the floor of the House on April 2."

Perhaps it should have been 1 April. It is a pity that planting of questions has reached such a pass. I used to be hostile when some of our Ministers circulated hymn sheets of suggested supplementary questions. I did not believe that it did any service to the parliamentary process, and I objected strongly.

Dr. Lynda Clark (Edinburgh, Pentlands): Can the hon. Gentleman assure me that the Conservatives have abandoned the idea of planting questions? I was unfortunate enough to have them try to plant one on me some months ago, and I declined to ask it. I agree with the general thrust of what the hon. Gentleman says. Planted questions are unhelpful, and I should be delighted to hear that the Conservatives had given up the practice.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. and learned Lady's charm and distinction are such that she was mistaken for a Conservative Member. We are learning.

Planting questions is not a good idea. Those who are elected to the House should have the nous to ask their own questions, and to think up their own supplementaries. I can truthfully say that I have never accepted a plant. I hope that no self-respecting Member of Parliament ever would.

The motion mentions

"meaningless soundbites and partisan rhetoric".

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) has analysed the Prime Minister's responses to questions over the past year, and found that the Prime Minister sidestepped the question or refused to answer no fewer than 88 times—once in eight answers. That is the prerogative of Ministers at the Dispatch Box, and everyone does it from time to time. However, it has become an art form for the Prime Minister, who should look over his old answers. He was asked a straight question the other week, about when he last met Mr. Rupert Murdoch. He answered that he regularly meets newspaper proprietors. That is no answer. He was asked a specific question, and he should have given a specific answer. We have a right to know when the Prime Minister meets the most important media mogul in the world. If we are not told, we shall continue to ask.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): My hon. Friend has referred to a question that I asked the Prime Minister, and I am glad that he felt that it was pertinent. I discovered subsequently that the Prime Minister had seen Mr. Rupert Murdoch at Chequers only three weeks earlier.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My hon. Friend crept in, leaving me unaware that he was here. I was not at Chequers, but I am most grateful for that information, which is on the record now for all to read.

The amendment tabled by the Leader of the House is a shade complacent. She asks us to note

"that members of the Government are present daily in both Houses".

Big deal. Where else would they be expected to be? The right hon. Lady really cannot get away with that. Those Ministers are, she says,

"putting forward the case for the Government's legislative and financial proposals".

What else are they supposed to do? They are also, she says:

"being held to account for its"—

the Government's—

"policies and actions",

but I do not believe that that is done as effectively as it should be.

The motion mentions

"all-party support for the establishment of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons".

The Leader of the House will readily acknowledge, as she has before many times, the constructive roles played by my right hon. Friends the Members for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and for North-West Hampshire—and, for a time, by me—on the Modernisation Committee. The thrust of that Committee should be to make the House a more effective forum, and to make our other Committees more effective instruments for scrutiny. Every proposal from the Modernisation Committee should have those aims in view. If we believe that they do, we shall support them. If not, we could not support them.

The Leader of the House said that Ministers have made more statements in this Session than in the equivalent period of 1992–93. That is understandable. A Government flushed with victory and with all sorts of things to place before us should introduce more statements than a Government in the last year of a Parliament.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that 1992–93 was the first year of a Parliament?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sorry. However, we were already into our fourth term, and we were merely building on the achievements of previous periods in office. The past year was the first in which the Labour party had been in power in 18 years, and we expected a lot of statements. However, many of those statements were leaked.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed was right to say that we need to consider the media's position, particularly that of "Today". I know that Ministers are tempted to accept invitations on to that programme, but it is wrong of them to trail statements in detail before they make them in the House. I trust that the Leader of the House will remain in her position after the forthcoming reshuffle, because she is a good Leader of the House.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: That's got me worried.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sure that she has no need to worry. I hope that the right hon. Lady will use the recess to write to her ministerial colleagues to draw their attention to the code, telling them precisely what they should and should not do and say on "Today" or elsewhere.

The motion states:

"ministers have given oral evidence to select committees".

If a Select Committee asks a Minister to come, the Minister comes to give evidence. It is quality of evidence and lack of evasion that are important. There have been some sorry performances before Select Committees in the past year, one of which has occupied the attention of the House more than once. The Leader of the House cannot rest on her laurels.

The motion says that the Government have lived up to their manifesto commitment. The Leader of the House will know what is satisfying in that regard, but, from this vantage point, I do not feel that the Government have served the House as they should have over the past year.

An item in today's *Financial Times* says that the freedom of information Bill is at risk. Even if only by way of an intervention, I hope that the Leader of the House or the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, who is scribbling furiously, will nail that lie. I take it that we will get the draft freedom of information Bill that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster promised in the Queen's Speech. It would make a mockery of the defence that the Leader of the House has put up this afternoon if we will not.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made an interesting speech to introduce the motion. The House is grateful to him. I hope that his colleagues will support him. Although there are many differences between us and the Liberal Democrats—to give them their full and exalted title, although the hon. Gentleman who complained about that seems to have left—I hope that we are united in wanting a Parliament in which Government can be held fully and properly to account and where legislation can be fully and thoroughly scrutinised. I hope that the Government will take no further step to frustrate either of those objectives.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is particularly pertinent to this debate and to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). Today, the Government issued a White Paper entitled "Promoting Disabled People's Rights for the 21st Century" on the creation of a disability rights commission—a manifesto commitment by the Government and a matter of major concern to disabled people. I understand that the Minister responsible for disabled people talked about the forthcoming White Paper on the Radio 4 "Today" programme this morning and that there was a press conference launching it this morning, yet there has been no statement about it to the House. Is this not another example of the Government bypassing Parliament? I should be grateful for your guidance on whether it is normal practice for the Government to issue a White Paper through statements rather than the "Today" programme.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am a member of the Select Committee on Social Security, which is having a busy round of meetings. The Government have made much of trying to involve the Committee in pre-legislative inquiries. We are conducting one on pension splitting on divorce. Just as the Government did not see fit to bring the White Paper to the House, they did not see fit to bring it to the Select Committee. What is the point of having a Select Committee if it is kept in the dark, like the rest of Parliament?

Mr. MacShane: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Had we had a statement on the White Paper, we would not have had a debate. As the official Opposition never allow statements on their Opposition days, is this point of order not typical of the frivolous hypocrisy that we have come to expect of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It is not automatic practice that a statement of Government policy is always made to the House. Over the years, practice has varied according to the matter concerned. It is not a point of order on which the Chair can rule, so much as a matter for a debate. We happen to be having that debate now.

6.3 pm

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): I am sure that disabled people will be more interested in the fact that, after 18 years without progress on disability rights, we have a Government who are about to do something about them.

I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats have given us the opportunity of debating the relationship of Government to Parliament, for two reasons. First, it gives us the opportunity to nail the myth perpetuated by the Opposition parties that the Government have little regard for the House or Back Benchers. Secondly, I am fed up with the derogatory and damaging portrayal of new Members as having no interest in fulfilling their scrutiny role. Particularly offensive are the gratuitous attacks on new female Labour Members, which are as sexist as they are unjustifiable. To be fair, they have emanated from the Conservatives rather than from the Liberal Democrats.

The majority of new Members do not want the great traditions and history of the House eradicated or its role downgraded, but, to use a concept defined by a distinguished Member of the House, we seek to apply traditional values in a modern way. At the heart of this debate are the accusations that the Government have centralised power in the hands of a few Ministers and trusted advisers, and that scrutiny and debate have been abandoned in favour of spin doctoring and sycophancy. It is time that the facts spoke for themselves.

The Prime Minister set in motion a system for electing Members of the European Parliament that will inevitably lead to reduced Labour representation in Brussels and an increase in the representation of Opposition parties. The Government have devolved power to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. The Tories have been practically wiped off the political map in Wales and Scotland, but will almost certainly secure more representation than they have now.

The Government are committed to a referendum of the British people on the Jenkins commission recommendations on a new voting system. The option ultimately presented to the British people could conceivably not be favoured by the Prime Minister or by the majority of Labour Members. So much for centralist tendencies. I suspect that many Labour Members would welcome a more centralist approach on those matters.

Several accusations often appear on the charge sheet levelled against the Government on its relationship with Parliament. First, it is said that Back Benchers do not rigorously scrutinise the Executive. Let us be frank. The main Opposition party is the most ineffective Opposition for a generation. The shadow Cabinet is led by a man whose main virtue is that he is not the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). Many of its members are recycled former Ministers who continue to labour under the misapprehension that they were born to rule and that 1 May 1997 was an illusion, an aberration or both.

There is also the often-repeated accusation that Labour Members are sycophants, ruthlessly controlled by a combination of pagers and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). Perhaps we should ask the Foreign Secretary whether he feels that Labour members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs neatly fit into that category. We could ask the same of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in respect of his departmental Select Committee or of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose approach to the single currency was questioned publicly by the Treasury Select Committee. They are compelling, authentic examples of the Executive being held to account by hon. Members, but they are rarely used in evidence because they contradict the conventional wisdom of what has become a good story.

I do not deny, or apologise for, the fact that the instinct of the vast majority of Labour Members is to be loyal to the Government. There are three predominant reasons for that.

First, disunity made a massive contribution to the 18 years that we spent in opposition and ultimately rendered the Conservative party unfit to govern. Disunited parties not only do themselves a disservice, but become paralysed and unable to pursue the public interest.

Secondly, unlike their predecessor, this Government have put in place policies that allow them to achieve the commitments made in their manifesto. I want to hold the Government to account on the commitments that I made to the people of Bury, South before the general election. It is difficult to fault the Government on that, as the Opposition are rapidly realising. We can tell that because when the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the results of the comprehensive spending review last week, the Liberal Democrats did not say that we should spend more, but suddenly suggested that they would watch more closely our ability to deliver.

Thirdly, there are many other ways in which Members can fight for their constituents' interests, including conversations in the Lobby; meetings with and letters to Ministers; ministerial visits; campaigns that attract the support of colleagues and the interest of the media; Adjournment debates; and Select Committees. I do not accept that loyalty contradicts independence and/or integrity or is somehow a threat to the purity of parliamentary democracy.

I turn to the other issues that have been raised in the debate. Of course, leaks of imminent Government announcements before ministerial statements in the House are regrettable. However, I sometimes wonder how Opposition Members maintain a straight face while protesting so self-righteously. Are such leaks a new Labour invention—no doubt the consequence of the inordinate amount of power given to the Prime Minister's spokesperson and other so-called spin doctors? It must be a figment of my imagination that similar leaks were common during 18 years of Tory rule and that a certain Mr. Bernard Ingham existed.

We have heard in the debate how Liberal Democrat spokespersons are capable of warning the press about speeches that they never deliver in the House.

There is also the bogus—I use that word deliberately—issue of the Prime Minister's attendance in the House. Of course it is right that he attends Prime Minister's Question Time and makes statements about international summits and other issues in his domain. He has done that, surpassing the attendance of the previous Prime Minister during his final 12 months in office. I cannot recall—perhaps my colleagues will assist me—many sightings of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) in the past 14 months. If his support for his colleagues was demonstrated by his 30-second appearance in the Chamber earlier, that is a sad reflection on his feelings about the importance of attendance in the House.

I believe that the Prime Minister owes no one on either side of the House an excuse or an apology for not attending more often. The British people want him to exercise his talents and energies tackling problems such as Northern Ireland, strengthening Britain's role in Europe and the world, and modernising our country economically and socially. It is only the egos and pettiness of some parliamentarians that would have him sitting in the Chamber waiting to vote late at night or touring the bars and the tea room.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Prime Minister has voted in about 5 per cent. of Divisions in the past year? Is he aware also that all the Prime Minister's predecessors since the war have voted considerably more often than that?

Mr. Lewis: I am aware that no Prime Minister in the history of this country is as popular as the present Prime Minister or has been able to begin to resolve the Northern Ireland situation. I am aware of many things regarding the Prime Minister's contribution since Labour was elected 14 months ago.

Of course it is essential that the Prime Minister remains in touch with the views and concerns of hon. Members, but meaningful structures must be created to facilitate that and lead to genuine, rather than superficial, dialogue. We have heard others mocking the fact that Labour Members

[Mr. Lewis]

ask helpful questions during Prime Minister's Question Time. Is it not time that we came clean with the British people and viewers around the world about the primary purpose of Prime Minister's Question Time? It exists to provide an opportunity for the Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Members to embarrass and undermine the Prime Minister and the Government in the full glare of the nation. It is disingenuous to suggest that it is anything but knockabout, superficial party politics. In that context, it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of Labour Members seek to assist the Prime Minister in rebutting Opposition attacks and promoting the Government's record in a positive manner.

I turn now to the much-maligned constituency weeks, which are parodied by the media as holidays and by the Opposition parties as another attempt to negate the importance of Parliament. Those views demonstrate clearly a flawed and out-of-date definition of the role of Members of Parliament. It is no wonder that, in the past, Members of Parliament were out of touch with the lives of ordinary citizens. Let us be honest with each other while no one else is watching: this place is a theatre, a village and an institution, but it is the furthest thing possible from the real world.

Of course, Members' roles in Parliament are crucial. However, of equal value are the roles that we fulfil in our constituencies. Case work, community leadership, and supporting local businesses, voluntary groups and schools are important activities and ensure that our actions in the House are informed by the life experiences of real people. I believe that the attitude adopted by new Members of Parliament to those responsibilities is, on the whole, different from the attitude of those whom they have replaced.

I remain perplexed by those hon. Members who manage to have paid jobs in addition to their role in this place—I can assume only that they are neglecting many of their duties. We all know that it is nearly impossible to do justice to the needs of our constituents and our families by confining our constituency activities to weekends. The concept of constituency weeks deserves praise, not cynical criticism from those who enjoy the game of politics but who often forget its purpose.

Parliament must continue to act as a credible check on the activities of Government. However, it must change if it is to retain the support and confidence of the people. Hereditary peers have no right to frustrate the will of democratically elected Governments. Outdated procedures and hours of sitting must be modernised if Members of Parliament are to make effective contributions. The Leader of the House deserves particular credit and support for her work in that area.

Irrespective of party, we should be better at explaining that much of what is best about the House and its scrutiny of Government occurs in the building but outside the Chamber. We should not seek to deny the impact of modern global telecommunications on people's views of politicians and politics. While there will be occasions when events in the House influence the political climate immediately or over time, we know that elections and popularity are increasingly determined by politicians' performances on the television and on radio and in newspaper reports and editorials.

Perhaps we should reflect on the fact that, when we fight for Parliament to hear important news first, we are saying that 659 people have more right to know than hundreds of thousands of citizens who tune into television and radio and read newspapers. However important elected representation is, are we correct in making that claim?

I believe that the charges levelled against the Government reflect the Opposition's frustration at the popularity of the Prime Minister and Government policies among the British people. Opposition Members hope that, by labelling the Government arrogant and unaccountable and their new Members of Parliament as sycophants, they will sow seeds of doubt that will eventually assist their political fortunes. In reality, the Opposition have no credible policies or alternative answers to the challenges facing Britain as we approach the 21st century. I am sure that the Government look forward to the day when they are faced with an effective Opposition. That is the real crisis of scrutiny in Britain today.

6.16 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): The motion, which I very much support, is about the tension between Parliament and Government, but it is apparently also about the tension between different elements of the Labour party. That has become evident this afternoon, and I shall explain it to the Minister.

We welcome the areas of agreement and co-operation to which the Leader of the House referred, but there is an element in the Labour party that is keen to centralise information and keep it secret and to deny Members of Parliament their proper role. Both of those elements in the Labour party are represented in the House today, and they are progressing parallel to each other during this Parliament.

I am keen to debate the motion partly to tease out the battle between the two sides. The result will be determined partly by the freedom of information legislation, to which hon. Members have referred—notably the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee, who has done a splendid job progressing that issue—and partly by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who popped into the Chamber a moment ago. He is the subject of much criticism and undermining.

It is interesting that, despite all the leaks that have been mentioned, there has been no reference to the leak that has appeared in the newspapers almost weekly for the past six months, which tells us that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will lose his job. I am interested to learn where that leak is coming from—it is certainly not coming from the Chancellor of the Duchy. I wonder whether his view of the future, which is based on openness, accountability and freedom of information, is shared by those who are leaking against him and suggesting that he would be better out of his job. They imply that the job should go to someone else, and the name of the Minister without Portfolio has been mentioned in that regard.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a Government who dispensed with the services of a

right hon. Gentleman as fundamentally honest and decent as the Chancellor of the Duchy would diminish themselves?

Mr. Baker: I agree entirely. The Chancellor of the Duchy is an honourable Minister and I hope that he retains—or, indeed, advances—his role in the Government.

Manipulation of the media is one area where the secretive and controlling tendency within the Labour party is exercised. The Leader of the House admits that there are background briefings to the "Today" programme. There is a fine line between a background briefing and providing information on documents that are about to be released.

I, for one, knew most of the contents of the White Paper on transport without having to come to the House to hear the Deputy Prime Minister's statement. On the radio that morning, he said that he was not responsible for that information having come out; I believe him because he is an honourable man, but somebody was responsible. All the information, on workplace parking charges, and everything else, was read out by the presenters on the "Today" programme as if it was fact, not speculation. It was stated, "Today's White Paper will pronounce on these particular matters." Someone had given the "Today" programme a clear steer which it had bought on that particular occasion.

The reason why manipulation of the media is so important is that it gives the Government an edge over Parliament, over the Opposition and, indeed, over their own Back Benchers, because the Government get their spin in first. Opposition Members and some Labour Members are fed up with living in spin and they want to see the Government proceed in a different manner.

In my Adjournment debate on 24 April, I set out the links with Mr. Rupert Murdoch and his colleagues—the incestuous relationships between close friends or members of the Labour party and Mr. Murdoch and News International. Recently, Tim Allan, who was for six years at the side of the Prime Minister, has taken the Murdoch shilling. We have watched the various links emerge between lobbyists and members of the Government—lobbyists who are members of the Labour party, or close friends of Ministers, or who have other such connections.

Lobbyists will always be with us of course, but it is important that they should be accountable, that we know what they are doing, that they perform according to set rules and that they are open to scrutiny. That is not the case at present. In a television interview earlier this year, Madam Speaker said:

> "There are far too many of what I would term apparatchiks who have been accustomed, when a party was in opposition, to want to get the maximum publicity. Now in government they have to be harnessed a little more."

That is exactly right.

The key question is whether the Government will allow one element—the central control freak element—to achieve its objective of pulling every lever available to it as the majority party as far as it will go, or whether they will exercise a bit of self-restraint in the interests of democracy and of Parliament and say, "No, we shouldn't pull that lever because it would tip the democratic balance too far in one particular direction." I would argue that some members of the Government are pulling every lever as far as it will go. There are many others who are not doing so, but some are.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: All of us on both sides of the House are concerned about lobbyists, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that there are a number of lobbyists who spend an awful lot of time around politicians in the House, who are members of the Liberal Democrats and who are actively seeking posts in that party—perhaps they want to be Liberal Democrat candidates at the next election? Is it not disingenuous to describe lobbyists as being solely the problem of the Labour party?

Mr. Baker: I gave way to the hon. Gentleman, even though he did not give way during his speech, but I do not think that he has been listening to my speech. The fact is that, because lobbyists will continue to exist, whether they are lobbying us, the Conservatives, the Labour party, or anyone else, it is important that they are regulated, that we see what they are doing and that they are publicly accountable for what they are doing.

Let me conclude by asking, what the role of Parliament is and how it is performing. We have a two-Chamber Parliament, but the upper Chamber is largely disregarded by the Government, who, when they do not like what comes out of the House of Lords, say, "That is an unelected body. It is full of hereditary peers and we shouldn't listen to them." The House of Lords is dismissed on that basis and is therefore ruled out of the equation in respect of amending legislation. In the Conservatives, we have an official Opposition who, bless their hearts, were not very good in government and are even worse in opposition, so they are not currently holding the Government to account to any great extent.

We have Labour Back Benchers, some of whom are very courageous and who, while being perfectly loyal to their party, speak their minds—I had better not say which Labour Members I have in mind, lest I damn them further, but there are those who speak their minds while remaining loyal. Equally, there are Labour Members who stand up at Prime Minister's Question Time and ask the Prime Minister whether he agrees that he is the best thing since sliced bread. That sort of question does not help the House. If they do not want to ask a difficult question, why do they not ask a constituency question and bat for their constituency, which is perfectly loyal and enables them to do something useful?

In summary, we have Labour Back Benchers who are constrained on pain of losing their seat, a Conservative Opposition who are frankly not very good, and the House of Lords which is ignored. In those circumstances, it behoves the Government to recognise that they have a massive majority and unlimited power. Although they do not use that power on every occasion, as the Leader of the House said, they have a responsible position and they must exercise their power responsibly. Labour Back Benchers must recognise that if that power is not exercised responsibly, it is not only the country that will be the loser. In time, the Labour party will be the loser as well.

6.24 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I shall try to keep my remarks brief because I am conscious that the three Front-Bench speakers have taken up nearly 60 per cent.

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

of the debate, so that, allowing the normal time for replies, only about 20 per cent. is left for Back Benchers. A little more timetabling would be no bad thing.

I believe that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has the whole-hearted support of our hon. Friends for her modernisation agenda. She can go harder, faster and further forward in making Parliament more effective, even notwithstanding a veto by the Conservatives.

I have been distressed to hear in the debate the view that the only truly honourable Member is one who disagrees with the manifesto on which he was elected. I find that utterly offensive. We are hearing the sour grapes of hon. Members who do not like the verdict of the British people. The British people decided last May on Prime Minister's questions and on several other issues, but, when the measures are put into operation, we are told that the people's views should be ignored because some obscure Liberal—or Liberal Democrat or whatever they call themselves—has to be heard.

We can scotch the myth that Parliament is somehow being downgraded. During the mid-19th century—the golden age of Parliament—the House of Commons met for barely six months and shut up shop for half the year. Churchill made his speeches warning Britain about Nazism to a completely empty Chamber. Over the past 10 years, from the high drama of Lady Thatcher's overthrow to the disappearance of the previous Government's majority, we have been fed on parliamentary royal jelly and it has been very exciting.

I remember that, when going into the Division Lobby three or four years ago, my pager went off; it was a message from my constituency party saying, "Defeat the Government." When we did so, a message came through saying, "Well done. Keep it up." I suppose I was on message even then, before the Whips got hold of my number—I have not given them my private number and they are not going to get it, either.

Now, we as a nation are in rather calmer water. We have a Government with a clear majority and an agenda for 10 or 20 years of modernisation and reform, as everyone in the country unites around new Labour and the third way; but, of course, the Government have to be accountable to Parliament. I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for providing figures on the extent to which the Labour Government are accountable.

So far, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made 12 full statements to the House and taken all the questions that followed, compared with only nine statements made by Mrs. Thatcher in 1983-84, when she also had a dominant majority. My right hon. Friend has already answered more than 800 questions in this Session. The fact is that, unlike every other Head of Government in Europe or anywhere else in the world, the Prime Minister comes to the House, week after week, to be held accountable by Members of Parliament.

So far in this Session, we have had 42,355 written questions, compared with only 35,000 questions in 1984–85, or 32,500 questions in 1991–92. The answers may not be satisfactory, but Ministers are responding. My goodness, I asked several oral questions of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) when he was Prime Minister and never once did I get a straight answer. It is absolute nonsense to suggest that Conservative Ministers at any stage answered questions directly or honestly.

One way in which the Speaker and Parliament can call Ministers to account is private notice questions. In 1992–93, the first full year of the previous Government, there were 26 private notice questions granted; so far in this Session, there have also been 26, so no change there. In addition, there have been many ministerial statements.

It is interesting to note that the number of Select Committee hearings has risen from 827 in 1983–84 to 1,081 in 1992-93; and by the time Parliament rises at the end of next week, that figure will have risen to 1,338. Select Committees are increasingly holding Ministers and experts to account.

It is nonsense to suggest that Members of Parliament are not putting the Executive under pressure. Perhaps they are not doing so in the House, because Front Benchers take up all the time with their lengthy speeches, but Back Benchers are having a tremendous impact in Committees. Many arguments have been presented and many opinions have been expressed, but the concrete facts that I have given show that this Government are as much under scrutiny—if not more—as any other recent Government.

Let me now turn to the fourth estate sitting in the Press Gallery. It would be helpful if the media provided some proper parliamentary reporting. The BBC has undoubtedly let us down by "cleansjng" parliamentary reporting from the "Today" programme. However, we also need hon. Members to turn up. Where are they? They all trooped in for that stupid publicity stunt at 6 pm, but they then whizzed out as fast as they could to read out their statements. Admittedly, one Conservative Member is present—and a very distinguished parliamentarian he is, too.

We have had two important debates on the two most recent Fridays, one on NATO enlargement and one on the Landmines Bill. Last Friday's debate on NATO enlargement was opened by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary; his shadow did not turn up. The Opposition defence spokesman made the speech, gave apologies and left the Chamber. As for the debate on the previous Friday—the subject being landmines, an issue which was very important to the country—the shadow Foreign Secretary was present, but the shadow Defence Secretary did not grace the House with his presence.

That is the problem: we do not have an official Opposition who are taking the House seriously. Perhaps that is because there are 19 Conservative Front Benchers with extensive outside earnings. As long as this part-time approach to Parliament continues, with hon. Members' earning more from two consultancies—or other outside earnings—than from a salary for holding the Executive to account, this place will suffer. The Leader of the Opposition has cleaned out his sinuses. As a sufferer from sinusitis, I have some sympathy with him, but I think that, having done that, he needs to clean up his Front Bench.

In my opinion, this Government are accountable to Parliament. As a parliamentary private secretary to a Minister in the Foreign Office, I sense that Ministers are concerned about appearances on the Floor of the House and before Select Committees. That is right, but there is not much more that the Government can do until—occasionally—there is someone on the Opposition Benches. Until then, Parliament's good name will suffer.

6.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I do not think that any of us can take pride in the attendance at today's debate. Although this may be acutely embarrassing to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) in particular, I think that Parliament is diminished by the lack of interest that is being shown in such an important subject.

Reference has been made to a question that I asked the Prime Minister on 3 June. Let me place it on record that I have had no problems in that regard from the Chief Whip or from any of his subordinates. An awful lot of mythology is sometimes created about such things. Indeed, I have received considerable endorsement from some very senior members of the Government—although I will not embarrass them by saying who they are. The point is that, in my opinion, the message that I tried to convey on 3 June commands the support of many hon. Members across the political spectrum. I said that there should be less choreography and more spontaneity in the House. I also think that the growing habit of reading speeches should be deprecated.

Following what I said, there were many good-humoured comments, but there was also a suggestion that I had become a Trotskyite. When that charge did not stick, it was suggested that I was going to join the Liberals. Then I was asked whether I had been given Matthew Parris's planted question.

As for my being a Trot, I have been a member of the Labour party for a long time—like my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—and I have supported and sustained Labour Governments and Labour Oppositions in good times and bad; but there are some who, as members of other parties in the late 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s, peddled the most godalmighty rubbish on occasion, and are now members of Her Majesty's Government. If anyone really pressed me on the issue, I would want to draw attention to that.

As for my joining the Liberals, if you cut me in half, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would see that I have "Labour" written all the way through me like a stick of rock. As regards Matthew Parris, I have never had a conversation with him in my life—although I would love to, because I am sure that he is a delightful journalist.

Another point was put to me, quite seriously. People said to me, "Your game plan, Mackinlay, is to be as difficult as you can, so that you will be promoted." That brings me to a serious issue. One of the problems in our political system is the assumption by friend and foe alike, by journalists and others, that promotion in politics means becoming a Minister. I reject that view. I want to make this abundantly clear: I want to paint it on people's eyelids. I do not want to be a Minister, and, during my time in the House, I have done everything possible to show it. I think that such a development would be retrograde. Above all else, we want people in the House of Commons who are prepared to scrutinise the Executive without fear or favour, and regardless of party.

Having said that, I must add that I have been guilty of many sins in my time, one of which is participation in adversarial politics. That is in the nature of our system, and I hope that I will do the same often in futures, but I feel that, far too often, we lob points across the Floor of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) referred to "knockabout superficial politics". I think that Oppositions should occasionally congratulate Governments, and Governments should accept sensible suggestions from Opposition parties. That, I think, is wholly consistent with the basic principle that British politics is adversarial. I hope that all parties will reflect on the need for greater maturity in approaching the ideas and propositions of the various partes.

Reference has been made to the number of statements that have been issued, the number of questions tabled to the Prime Minister, and whether statements should have been made to the House. There is a problem for any Government in that regard. If a Government are prepared to issue White Papers and so forth, they may clog up the parliamentary day and the parliamentary week with statements.

We saw that this evening. We are engaged in an important debate, but there was a statement earlier that ate into our time, and there have been points of order about the fact that there was not a statement about something else. We need a system allowing statements to be made that do not take up core parliamentary time, so that the House has an opportunity to examine other issues.

That brings me to the maturing role of Select Committees. Perhaps the task of taking questions on the Floor of the House should be more absorbed by Select Committees, if we want this place to remain the fulcrum of democratic debate in our country and to maintain its current richness and spontaneity, with less and less choreography. I must also accept, reluctantly, that we are moving to a presidential system. That is not anyone's fault; the fact is that telegenics is important, as are the instant news media. That exists, and cannot be undone or wished away. Meanwhile, the role of Government is so large.

I hope that, during the lifetime of the present Government, we will find ways of providing the necessary checks and balances of a presidential system, because that is what is missing. We need a system enabling us to scrutinise actions by Government—by the Executive. This basically Victoriana-style Parliament—I do not mean that disparagingly—has not so far been able to build such scrutiny into its machinery.

As for the House of Lords, I must say to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire that it would be tremendously helpful to the United Kingdom if the Conservatives argued for a democratic House. Presumably my right hon. Friends would say, "We will take it." The fact is that, as sure as night follows day, there will eventually be a democratically elected upper House, and after a while everyone will wonder what all the fuss was about.

There is no excuse for not having a democratically elected Chamber—a Chamber subordinate to the House of Commons, which will always be supreme, but a second Chamber that has the opportunity to scrutinise and, indeed, to frustrate. I think that frustration is an important element in democracy. It should be there regardless of the fact that a Government may have a mandate at the general election—the mandate should not be a blank cheque enabling Governments to railroad through any measure without reflection.

I should like to see a democratically elected House of Lords. If we are to have an interregnum of an appointed House, I hope that my right hon. Friend the

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

Prime Minister will consider these two suggestions: first, he could set up elections within the Labour party to decide who should be Labour peers, and no doubt other parties could follow suit; secondly, instead of having mere nominees from the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leaders of the other principal Opposition parties, why could not Madam Speaker nominate a few people, so that the loose cannon, the maverick, the eccentric and the jolly difficult could get into the House of Lords? That is, until such time as it becomes a democratically elected Chamber.

I have no desire to be a Member of that Chamber, because my lifelong ambition was to be Labour Member supporting a Labour Government. I have said already that my ambition was not to become a Minister. Instead, I wish to stay in Parliament in the Labour cause, staying in the House of Commons.

We need to consider the control and management of the House. I think that we should have repatriated to the House, from the Government, decision making on how and when the House sits and what train paths there are for legislation. Those matters should be in the hands of a Select Committee of distinguished parliamentarians, so that Government would have to negotiate the time that should be made available for Bills. Parliament would decide when the House should sit.

There should be ring fencing of private Members' legislation instead of the charade of having a Second Reading debate and no more. If there is a majority in Parliament—certainly in a democratic House—for a measure to go through, the Government, so long as they control the timetable, should ensure that it goes through the legislative process and is not held up by any humbug. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) graciously nodding in agreement. Believe it or not, I am grateful for that.

The Labour party in opposition, in general election after general election, at least implied to the electorate that, if it were elected, the abolition of fox hunting would be given the opportunity to reach the statute book. I do not lie awake at night worrying too much about such legislation, but I am certain that it was implied to the electorate that, if it commanded a majority in the House, such a Bill would be able to reach the statute book. That was implied, but it has not happened.

I welcome this debate. I wish that we had had more time to explore these matters. I conclude by reiterating the remark of my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), that loyalty does not contradict the concept of independence in this place. I am proud to be a member of the Labour party. I was a Labour parliamentary candidate on, I think, six occasions when some others were members of other parties, trying to undermine Labour Governments and Labour leaders.

Sometimes the best friends that a Government can have are those who give them counsel and caution. Mrs. Thatcher eventually had no one left at the Cabinet Table to say, "Prime Minister, I think that the poll tax is a daft idea." There is always danger for a Government if there is suppression of the enthusiasm and loyalty of Back Benchers who see it as their job to counsel their own Government as well as criticising the Opposition.

6.42 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I would love to follow every intricacy of the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), but I shall not do so, for two reasons. First, in the interests of brevity, we want to try to complete the debate reasonably soon. Secondly, it might embarrass the hon. Gentleman to know that I agree with almost everything he said, and that most of his arguments are Liberal Democrat policies.

I hope that the Leader of the House will have had time—if not, I hope that she will make time—to think carefully about the comments of a number of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber this evening, and to read an extremely interesting article in today's *Independent* by Donald Macintyre entitled, "Is there any life left in the House of Commons?" Many of the criticisms that have been made on the Floor of the House today are repeated in that article. These are not merely House of Commons matters, of concern only to Members. Many important and interested commentators outside the House share the views that have been expressed from those occupying the Liberal Democrat Benches and the Conservative Benches, and by the hon. Member for Thurrock in the past few minutes.

It was not necessary to be a supporter of the Labour party to witness and perhaps experience a feeling of some relief, hope and expectation on 2 May 1997. Many people, even Conservatives, felt that it was time for a change. One reason was that many people were fed up with the bitter memories of the arms-to-Iraq scandal, as exposed by the Scott report, when Ministers, despite the faults that were obvious then, and despite their demeanour in deliberately deceiving the House, refused to resign.

There were bitter memories, too, of a tide of sleaze—the lies and deceptions of some Members. Perhaps that involved only a handful of Tory Members, but some Members were involved, and there were still no resignations. There were bitter memories of a Government who dug themselves deeper and deeper into a hole—into a bunker, perhaps—and were afraid to face reality especially over some of the crises that occurred towards the end of that Administration, such as the BSE crisis.

Against that background, the Labour Government came to office with a great deal of hope and expectation from people who were not necessarily their supporters, including many Liberal Democrats. One of the first actions of the new Government was to compress Prime Minister's questions in the parliamentary timetable from two slots on Tuesday and Thursday into one slot on Wednesday. That happened without adequate consultation, and without an opportunity for the House to debate the issue.

As it happens, I do not think that the new Prime Minister's questions format is that much worse than the old, but it was, to my mind, symbolic of the new Government and their arrogance on taking office that they did not think it necessary to give the House the opportunity to discuss that important change.

The hon Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said that the change was referred to in the Labour party's manifesto. That is bunkum. The following statement appeared in that manifesto:

"Prime Minister's Questions will be made more effective."

If anyone thinks that what we have experienced over the past 12 months is more effective than what we had previously, he should think again.

The only changes that have been effective are the ones that the Modernisation Committee has introduced into Prime Minister's questions. I am glad to hear that the Leader of the House has accepted my proposal that there should now be a proper review of the experience of the past 12 months, with all parties involved, so that we can fulfil the objective of the Labour party manifesto. Prime Minister's Question Time has certainly not been made more effective so far.

Another statement in the Labour party's manifesto was perhaps commendably brief, but I think that people would say that it was rather general:

"Ministerial accountability will be reviewed so as to remove recent abuses."

That came under the heading "An effective House of Commons". Anyone who thinks that that has happened over the past 12 months has another think coming. That review may be coming, and I hope that it will, but it has certainly not taken place so far.

I hope that the Modernisation Committee, on which I am pleased to sit, under the chairmanship of the Leader of the House, will be given a role in the review. The Government amendment acknowledges that there has been no change since March 1997 on this issue. There is a reference to it, but there has been no change.

Substantial evidence has been put before the House tonight about ministerial statements. There was the recent curious episode when the occupancy of the Conservative Benches increased by about 400 per cent. when some Conservative Members dashed into the Chamber to tell us how important they think the House is—that happened for two or three minutes—and to draw attention to a White Paper published this afternoon promoting disabled people's rights.

When my party was consulted about the timing of statements—we acknowledge that that is a perfectly proper and welcome activity for the usual channels, and I shall not betray any confidences—we indicated that we would be very interested in a statement on disabled people's rights. However, we were not consulted about it being slipped in by the back door without a proper statement in the House. It is extraordinary that, if it was found necessary last week to make a statement on the subject—it was suggested that this was a proper day on which the statement should take place, although that would take time out of our debate—it should now be found necessary to make a statement, but not to the House, simply to the media at a press conference.

Those criticisms came originally not from Members but from the Speaker's Chair. It is Madam Speaker who has drawn attention to this habit of Government. Madam Speaker properly said—our motion endorses this—that the habit has not suddenly grown since 3 May 1997. I remember many occasions on which I complained to the previous Leader of the House in the previous Parliament about government by press release. That has increased, is increasing, and should diminish. That is surely an issue that the Leader of the House, who represents us all in government, should take up seriously with her colleagues in Cabinet.

I was surprised by the right hon. Lady's reaction to the criticisms from various parts of the House of the Government's attitude to the House of Lords. She cannot have been in her place when her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in an extraordinary and uncharacteristic rant, gave the House the impression that anything that came from the other place should automatically be knocked down. That is effectively what he said. At the end of his speech that night on tuition fees at Scottish universities, he said that he did not care what was said in the House of Lords, it would be knocked down by the House of Commons, and we had a right to do so.

That is an extraordinary attitude to adopt a few months before we see the Government's proposals for the reform of the House of Lords, especially as that amendment, as has been pointed out, was defeated by the life peers, not by the hereditary peers, and by the non-Conservative peers. If that attitude is adopted, as the hon. Member for Thurrock said, the House of Lords will not be able, under the reform that the Government have in mind, to prevent a blank cheque from being issued to any Government—and it could be a Conservative Government in future.

The right hon. Lady and her colleagues should contemplate the occasions on which the House of Lords had the independence of mind, under those 18 years of Conservative rule, to knock down a Conservative proposition. Were the Lords all right then, and are they suddenly all wrong now?

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), in his inimitable style, presented some additional evidence to arm our case. I am grateful for his contribution to the debate; I just wish that he had had more support from his Back Benchers. Apart from the extraordinary episode I mentioned, they have been totally absent. I am glad that a couple of them have now turned up.

In the recent Friday debates to which the hon. Member for Rotherham referred, on landmines and on NATO, there were more hon. Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches than on the Conservative Benches. That comes hard from hon. Members who have spent considerable time in recent months complaining about contempt of Parliament. Where are they this evening? I expect that they have gone off to entertain themselves elsewhere.

The Labour Back Benchers who contributed to the debate have been notable for two reasons. First, we heard two speeches from Labour Members which, to judge from their tedious repetition, were evidently drafted by the Minister without Portfolio. Secondly, we had the interesting contribution from the hon. Member for Thurrock. I shall not embarrass him any more by referring to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) identified precisely the purpose of Back Benchers, whichever party they represent. We are in the House to hold the Government to account. That is our purpose, collective and individual. I hope that we will see more of it in future.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) referred to the interesting contribution to a debate on 19 November 1997 by the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), in which he spoke of the parliamentary Labour party's standing orders. In my view, they are a potential contempt of the House. In 1974, when I was a member of the National Union of Journalists, I was held to account by my union—by the Glasgow chapel of the NUJ—because I dared not only to speak my mind in the House, but to vote on a particular issue. I was summoned to a meeting of the Glasgow NUJ. I took the matter to the then Speaker, and it was found to be a clear contempt of the House.

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

The Labour party should look closely at its standing orders. If there is a real threat, as described by the hon. Member for Brent, East, that he could lose his livelihood because of the way that he spoke and voted in the House—for the sake of time, I shall not quote again what he said, but that is the clear implication—that was a contempt of Parliament.

I understand that the Prime Minister is to make one of his fairly rare visits to the House tomorrow to speak to the parliamentary Labour party. If he believes the words in the amendment to which he has put his name, he should seek to change those standing orders. I know that he cannot control these matters—presumably not even the Minister without Portfolio controls the parliamentary Labour party to that extent—but the Prime Minister should put his name to a change in the standing orders, to make sure that the "more than my job's worth" attitude of some Labour Back Benchers goes for good. That would be a useful issue for discussion at tomorrow's meeting of the parliamentary Labour party.

I shall refer to one other episode of recent weeks. On 1 July, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), the Prime Minister said:

"The hon. Gentleman will know that medical students are exempt from the new provisions on student finance."—[*Official Report*, 1 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 355.]

That was said with no qualifications—a firm statement. I must be careful not to use unparliamentary language, but it is simply untrue.

Everybody knows that that statement is untrue. Within a few minutes we knew that it was untrue, yet, under consistent pressure from my colleagues and me, neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the House has been prepared to accept that that is simply an inaccurate statement. It was probably a slip of the tongue, but is it not extraordinary that the foremost Minister in the country is not prepared to admit to a small mistake?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Not big enough.

Mr. Tyler: Not big enough. Surely the Prime Minister and his colleagues should be prepared to accept that mistakes are made in the House. The least they can do, out of respect for parliamentary democracy, is admit to those mistakes.

In a parliamentary democracy, Ministers, and even the Prime Minister, must be big enough to be open and honest with Parliament. They must be big enough to admit a mistake, however big or small, when they are clearly in the wrong. One reason why the previous Government went down to such a humiliating defeat was that they became arrogant about their own power, arrogant in the conviction that they were always right and did not need to listen to anyone else, and arrogant in the belief that they did not even need to listen to the House of Lords.

For the sake of the future of parliamentary democracy and the confidence that people have in this institution, I should be sorry if the high hopes of May 1997 dwindled into dust. A Government who fail to take responsibility and to admit to their mistakes demean themselves, demean Parliament and demean the ethos of our democracy.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): I am proud to stand and defend the record of a Government who pride themselves on their openness, their modernising tendencies and their willingness to meet the needs and demands of the House.

Some of the comments made in the debate suggest that the House can be over-confrontational. That is true, but there are times when it is necessary to be confrontational. We must confront injustice, dishonesty, poverty in our communities, and so on. However, there are also times to be emollient and to accept criticism. Unfortunately, I have not heard a great deal today to make me feel emollient towards the Opposition on either side of the Gangway.

I shall deal first with the comments of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) about my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. By his own admission, he is the patron saint of lost causes. I know that his benediction on her prospects has caused her some concern. He will be aware, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) pointed out, that during the debate there was a sudden influx of Conservative Members, who quickly left when they had made their rather spurious point.

It is worth putting on the record what really happened. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) came in and suggested that, once again, the Government had, in her view, acted improperly—over the White Paper on disability. Let me give the timetable of events.

The White Paper on disability was announced in a written question at 11 o'clock; the White Paper was available from the Vote Office at 11 o'clock; and a press conference was held at 11 o'clock. Moreover, only last Monday, the Minister of State, Department of Social Security was refused permission, through the usual channels, to make the statement that was being demanded on benefit fraud—a subject which is supposed to be close to the heart of the official Opposition—because it was an Opposition day. It was established by your colleague, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that there was no precedent for banning statements or ruling on how and when they should be made, particularly on an Opposition day.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) made a number of charges against the Government, the first of which was on the presentation of Government policy. As we have said many times from the Dispatch Box, we have never shrunk from establishing in public that presentation is a key element of Government strategy. We do not simply believe that we have a right; there is a legitimate expectation that we present the Government's case in the most effective way possible. Presentation is extremely important if we are to have effective governance. People must know what we intend to do and how we intend to achieve it. We do not shrink from taking any measures required to ensure that that is done.

Despite the attempts of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to enlighten him, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed failed to differentiate between briefing and leaking. There is a big difference between the responsibility of Ministers and officials to ensure that the background and context of papers and policy announcements are put into the public domain, and the leaking of a policy change or White Paper.

What I found most extraordinary about the right hon. Gentleman was his defence of the Lords. Perhaps he expects that, in the not-too-distant future, he will join friends of his in another place. This House and the Government have not just a right but a responsibility to do what we believe is right with amendments to legislation that come back from the other place. Merely to quote a list of amendments which this House chose to change in accordance with the manifesto of the elected Government was extraordinary.

Mr. Beith: Does the Minister not remember occasions, when he was in opposition, when he challenged the Government of the day to accept sensible amendments tabled by another place against the wishes of that Government? Will he recognise that that must sometimes happen under his Government?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I recognise that there were occasions when we argued that the Government of the day should accept sensible amendments. Indeed, I recall one such occasion when the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) fully supported us, and we eventually defeated the Government. However, the key word is "sensible", rather than wrecking amendments, or amendments designed simply to defeat the will of this House.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The Minister is entitled to say that he does not agree with the amendment on students at Scottish universities, but is he seriously telling the House that it was not sensible?

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a straightforward issue of a policy clash. The policy of the elected Government of the day, who have a record 180 majority, will prevail if there is a policy clash. I must make an important point: we take each of those amendments on their merit. We do not generalise.

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Kilfoyle: No, I shall not give way. My time is very limited, and nobody else gave way.

The charge was risible—*[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I know the Labour manifesto, and we intend to put it into effect. If hon. Members check it, they will find that we made 161 manifesto commitments. A large proportion of those have already been achieved by Her Majesty's Government in the past 15 months.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made the charge that Tim Allan had gone away to become a lobbyist. He has not. In accordance with Nolan, there has been a gap between the time he left the employ of No. 10 and took up his new post with BSkyB. It is only fair to the individual concerned that we put that on the record.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) is no longer here, because he became very exercised about the suggestion that his party was the Liberal party rather than the Liberal Democrat party. I could suggest an even better name: the party of Janus, because Liberal Democrats have the unique ability to face both ways at once. They are doing so tonight, and have done so consistently in their charges on lobbying and on leaks—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is an awful lot of background noise in the Chamber. We should be able to hear the Minister.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am conscious of the time that has already been taken up by Front-Bench Members on both sides, so I shall make just one or two points in the remaining few minutes.

It was significant to me that only one Liberal Democrat Back Bencher put himself forward to speak in this debate, so seriously do his colleagues take this subject. Indeed, the number of Liberal Democrats that one sees in the Chamber now does not reflect the number that showed an interest in the debate. I am a little dismayed that they should have chosen this subject for the third time, rather than a subject that could have aroused more interest among their Members.

The Liberal Democrats made great play of singing the praises of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). I am a fan of his, too, as are many Labour Members. However, we do not share the political paranoia that the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) obviously has for the Minister without Portfolio. Even in making public their praise for my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock through an early-day motion, fewer than half their Members found themselves capable of supporting that.

The Government are fully cognisant of the needs and demands of the House, and long may that remain the case. We shall continue to observe the conventions of the House, but we shall also continue to govern effectively according to the mandate given to us on 1 May 1997.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 310.

Division No. 341] **[7.7 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Donald Gorrie.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question. That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that members of the Government are present daily in both Houses, putting forward the case for the Government's legislative and financial proposals and being held to account for its policies and actions; welcomes the all-party support for the establishment of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and the endorsement by the House of key proposals to make Parliament more effective and efficient; notes that more statements have been made by ministers this session than in the equivalent period in 1992–93, and that Cabinet ministers have given oral evidence to select committees on more occasions than the average for the past seven sessions; and believes that the Government has lived up to both its manifesto commitment and the 19 March 1997 resolution on ministerial accountability.

European Single Currency

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): We now come to the debate on the European single currency. I inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I call Dr. Vincent Cable. *[Interruption.]* My apologies, I thought that Dr. Cable was opening the debate. I call Mr. Malcolm Bruce.

7.20 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I beg to move,

That this House believes that membership of the European Single Currency will be in Britain's long-term economic interests because it will promote trade, increase competitiveness, secure inward investment, reduce interest rates, boost economic stability, consolidate the City of London's pre-eminent financial market position, and promote growth, employment and Britain's influence in Europe; calls on the Government to hold a referendum on the principle of the Single Currency during the current Parliament and to join the Single Currency at the earliest practical opportunity; and in the intervening period to implement a series of policies to prepare for Single Currency membership including: joint six monthly reports by the Treasury and the Bank of England on progress towards interest rate convergence with the Euro zone, steps to secure a stable and fairly valued pound, action to align UK and Euro inflation levels and targets, and discussions with the UK's European partners aimed at promoting an accountable structure for the European Central Bank and maximum possible fiscal subsidiarity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) certainly has the qualifications, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and will reply to the debate.

First, I want to explain why we have chosen to have this discussion at this time. It is not simply because my party believes that Britain should be a member of the single currency at the earliest opportunity, but because we believe that events are moving rapidly, and that the need for us to take early decisions is becoming greater by the minute. The continuing strength of sterling and the uncertainty over the euro could lead to a major flight of manufacturing investment from the United Kingdom in just a few months. If that happened, thousands of jobs would be threatened.

There is clear evidence to suggest that in crucial areas, such as key sectors of manufacturing, the United Kingdom is becoming uncompetitive. Productivity is well below that of our continental competitors, and investment is at rock bottom. We also face a higher inflation rate, higher interest rates and increasing exchange rate uncertainty. That is an awful lot of difficulties for business to take on board when making investment decisions.

To secure their markets within the euro zone when the pound is strong, some manufacturing companies may feel compelled to transfer their investments from the UK to euroland, rather than risk waiting for a possible collapse of sterling once the euro is established. Several such warnings have been made in a number of sectors, and they can no longer be ignored—the Government would be very unwise to ignore them.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for a clear declaration of intent. The Government should declare the UK's intention to join the single currency, and that should be reinforced by an early referendum and by detailed steps to achieve convergence. Why is it that our major continental competitors maintain consistently high levels

[Mr. Malcolm Bruce]

of investment and productivity compared with the United Kingdom? Is it because they have enjoyed years of stable, low inflation, low interest rates and stable exchange rates?

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will let me continue for a moment.

Our continental competitors have the certainty of knowing that they will be in the euro and what the exchange rate will be on 1 January 1999. Those factors make the climate for investment a great deal more attractive—and at much lower rates of return than are acceptable to the average British investor.

We support the Government's commitment to low inflation. We accept that it is a necessary precondition for a good investment climate. We welcomed the Government's decision to give operational independence to the Bank of England as a step towards achieving such a climate—we naturally welcomed that measure, as it is our policy. However, we deplore the unbalancing effect of the Government's fiscal policy. That is coupled with the failure of the previous Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who is present and can tell us whether he accepts that he failed. When he took part in the Ken and Eddie show, he argued that time would tell who was right. Time is running out: it is now becoming more apparent who is right, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot hide behind the clock for much longer.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): It takes 18 months to two years for monetary policy to take effect. The present inflation rate is 2.8 per cent. Is a 0.3 per cent. variation from the target a great failure? If I had taken any notice of the hon. Gentleman, I would have raised interest rates for no good purpose whatever, given the outturn.

Mr. Bruce: Many independent commentators share my view that, had interest rates been raised before the election, the Monetary Policy Committee might not have been faced with its present dilemma. To a certain extent, I exonerate the right hon. and learned Gentleman, because the situation has been aggravated by the present Chancellor's decision to pursue a fiscal policy that has left the Monetary Policy Committee with no alternative but to put up interest rates. I am sure that we can agree on that.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's great enthusiasm, but would he bear in mind the fact that every previous experiment with a single currency in Europe or elsewhere in the world has resulted in a great deal of unemployment, misery and distress? History shows us that the only single currencies that can work are those under one Government, one Treasury and one system of taxation. Will the Liberal Democrats face up to that?

Mr. Bruce: My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) reminds me about the single currency that came into effect in 1707. Surely the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) would not regard that currency as a failure. It is not true that all single currencies have been failures. I would not be a radical if I listened only to the prophets of doom who say that the project is bound to fail. After all, 11 countries are determined to make a success of it.

Let me deal with the Government's amendment. The Liberal Democrats welcome the change of tone that the Government's position represents as compared with that of the previous Government. We accept that they are putting in hand some practical steps to prepare for the possibility of entry. Unlike the opponents and sceptics who regard even that with suspicion, we welcome it and want them to take more such steps.

However, we are concerned about the Government's determination to postpone the referendum until the next Parliament, and about their failure to set out a clearly defined path towards membership of the single currency. The Government's amendment to our motion says that making a decision to join during the present Parliament is unrealistic. I would argue that failing to accept that the national interest may require a decision during this Parliament is unrealistic and irresponsible. The Government's case may be that we will not achieve convergence during that time. If that is true, it is partly because their policies have aggravated divergence.

If we are to join the single currency, in this Parliament or in the next, we need a clear programme now; otherwise, we will suffer drift, uncertainty and a loss of investment and coherent momentum. We must face the fact that our competitors in countries that will be founder members of the euro will face none of the uncertainties that our companies will face with regard to investment for that market.

We advocate a declaratory policy on the single currency. By that, we mean that the Government should make an immediate declaration of Britain's intention to join, subject to approval from a referendum at the earliest opportunity. The referendum should not be arbitrarily postponed beyond the next election because it is inconvenient to address the matter before that.

Such an approach would allow time to achieve convergence—it would be helpful if the Government's policy were aimed in that direction—between our own and the continental economic cycles, and would also provide a sustained period of exchange rate stability before the currencies become locked. As has been said on many occasions, the policy would give the United Kingdom greater influence over the shape of EMU.

Changing to the single currency involves up-front conversion costs, but the single currency would bring significant long-term economic gains, some of which I shall address. There would be lower interest rates, which could cut mortgage costs for householders, and debt-servicing costs for business and Government. For example, a 1 to 2 per cent. reduction in interest rates would save the average mortgage payer £275 to £575 a year. Those are real benefits. [Hon. Members "Nonsense".] Conservative Members say that that is nonsense, but if we join the single currency, it will be at converged continental interest rates, not at British levels. Our job is to make sure that we can converge and deliver that benefit. It is interesting to note that the Conservatives favour high interest rates and high mortgage costs.

Such a policy would also benefit the Government. It would help cut their annual debt-servicing costs by between £3.5 billion and £7 billion. That is equivalent to a cut of 2 to 4 per cent. off the basic rate of tax, or £250 a year for the average taxpayer.

As a trading nation, we get enormous benefit if we can reduce uncertainty for exporters. Europe is Britain's biggest export market. We export more to Belgium and the Netherlands—just those two—than to Latin America, Africa, India, Australia, China and Russia combined. Some 55 per cent. of our exports go to EU nations. Those are facts.

The policy would also crucially consolidate the City of London's pre-eminent financial market position, and I include within the City of London all the finance companies throughout the UK economy that effectively lock in to that successful market. There are different views as to how the euro might affect the City, but there are growing worries that lengthy exclusion of the UK will encourage the development of other financial centres—especially Frankfurt, which is certainly missing no opportunity to increase its importance as a trading centre within Europe.

The dilution of the UK's role as a financial centre would not just be bad for the UK: the whole EU would be diluted. We are talking about an economy of scale which benefits the whole EU market.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in addition to his arguments, one of the reasons for stability in the rest of Europe is that Liberal parties throughout Europe are in favour of less Government spending and lower taxation, whereas in this country, the Liberal Democrats are in favour of more Government spending and higher taxation?

Mr. Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman is incorrect. He misses the fact that the social provision basis in most continental countries is higher than it is here, and that expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product on health and education is very much higher among all our major competitors. All we are anxious to do is to ensure that we have quality services here that are comparable to theirs.

The United Kingdom trades with the EU, but makes much of our investment in the United States. Some people see that as an argument for keeping our distance, but the reality is that we invest in the United States because that is the most effective way to secure a share of the North American market. As part of euroland, we can develop—using our close links with New York and other major American financial markets—as a conduit for euro-dollar investment both ways through the bridge of the UK. That will be denied to us if we are not part of the euro zone. That argument has been seriously underestimated.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Does the hon. Gentleman have any personal experience of the financial markets, or of working in them? If he did, and if he were taking his opinion from those who operate in them, rather than from some columnist who cannot get a job as a consultant and is simply writing in the financial pages of a national newspaper, he would not make remarks which are unsustainable.

Mr. Bruce: I have had to buy my own furniture, so I suppose I have some knowledge of transactions. The right hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that someone has no right to comment if they have not got their hands dirty.

If we are to secure a successful eventual merger—in our view, the sooner the better—of the single currency and sterling, we believe that what we need now, apart from an early referendum, is to set out what we would call the docking procedures for monetary union.

We believe that there are a number of things that the Government should be doing now. First, they should provide assistance to British businesses to cope with trading outside the euro zone. That seems to be uncontentious, because that is where we will be. I accept that the Financial Secretary has said that that is being done, but we are simply asking the Government to do more. We want them also to provide information on hedging exchange risk from billing in euros. We have addressed the subject of a referendum.

We need to establish a period of exchange rate stability before joining the single currency. As soon as we have had the referendum, we need to open discussions on how we can establish an appropriate rate for sterling and establish the mid-point at which we would join. We will have to have wide bands of fluctuation, but that point is already incorporated in the treaty agreements. The objective is to reduce the volatility of the British economy and to get it on the same broad course.

One of the issues that we must grasp is the gradual switch from variable to fixed-rate mortgages—by which I mean mortgages fixed for 10 or 20 years, rather than for the five years being offered by the financial institutions. The Liberal Democrats would welcome and support active Government encouragement of that.

We suggest that the Treasury and the Bank of England should produce six-monthly joint convergence reports detailing progress on fiscal and monetary policy towards our preparedness to join the single currency, and to monitor our convergence on interest rates. I suggest that such a report could usefully be presented to the Treasury Committee.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in certain circumstances, the reduction of interest rates to the continental level could occasion a rise in taxation in Britain to maintain the fiscal balance? Would he speculate on what would be best for the economy? Is there a balance between interest rates and taxation against the background of the stable exchange rates in the single market? That is a very important question.

Mr. Bruce: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. There is a tendency for that debate [Hon. Members: "Answer the question."] I will answer the question. The debate has been stifled because there is somehow the assumption that we cannot talk about taxes as opposed to borrowing or other financial mechanisms. The previous Government said that they were cutting taxes, but put them up. The present Government said that they would not put taxes up, but they have put them up.

[Mr. Bruce]

We take the view that it is about time we started talking about the role of taxation as a fiscal instrument and as an alternative to high interest rates. If we had had that—as we would have wished—at the start of this Parliament, interest rates could have been lower than they are now.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, next year—when the euro is launched—banks and building societies could allow people to take out mortgages in euros rather than in pounds? With the lower interest rates in euros, there would be a terrific flight to those mortgages, which would help bring down the value of the pound and would establish the popularity of the single currency.

Mr. Bruce: That is an interesting idea, but if people are to be encouraged to take it up in significant numbers, they have to have confidence in exchange rate stability. It must be set in that context. The Government would be in some difficulty if they encouraged people to do that and made them accept the risk of uncertain fluctuations in the exchange rate. I agree that in principle that is the right direction in which to move, and I have no doubt that some people will opt for it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: No. I have given way to several hon. Members, and this is a short debate.

Our measure of inflation must be in accordance with the treaty standard and the agreed EU measure. I hope that the Government will explain their progress on that. To frame fiscal policy and stabilise growth, we need to recognise the role of taxation. In the context of the current pensions debate, if there is to be some kind of additional, earnings-related, compulsory pension contribution it could be used as a fiscal adjustment in some years. Compared with taxation, that would have the advantage of inviting or directing people to give up some of their earnings but to put the money towards their pensions rather than into the Exchequer. That might make the scheme more acceptable, and the idea is worth exploring.

The European central bank should be made more accountable. We do not entirely agree with the bank's mechanisms, as compared with those of the Bank of England, which has a degree of political accountability. However, we understand the reasons for the difference, which is due to historical factors. The United Kingdom could suggest beneficial ways to make the European central bank more accountable, and we could do that more effectively if Britain was a founder member of the euro. We welcome the statement by the Governor of the Bank of England that he would continue to give evidence on monetary policy to the Treasury Committee if he were a member of the European central bank.

We accept the case for amending the growth and stability pact to allow for greater flexibility in the domestic operation of fixed fiscal policy. That is perfectly reasonable because the Maastricht treaty sets a limit of 60 per cent. of GDP debt ratio. Countries that are well below that should not be subject to the same strictures as countries that are at or above it. Of course, they should adhere to the golden rule principle over the economic cycle, which accords with the Government's current policy.

Measures to ensure a genuine single market, free competition and a more flexible labour market, mutual recognition of schools and qualifications and the liberalisation of financial services and pensions are great advances which would be of enormous benefit to the British economy. We cannot afford to shut ourselves off for much longer. All those measures would help to lock stability into the British economy and would create a climate in which people would not only enjoy the fruits of investment, low interest rates and the removal of exchange rate uncertainty, but would know that what they had secured was long term, so that they could invest with confidence at much lower rates of return than have historically been acceptable in the British economy. I commend the motion to the House.

7.42 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

welcomes the Government's conviction to pursue a prudent and balanced policy in respect of United Kingdom membership of the single currency; believes that, in principle, British membership of a successful single currency could bring economic benefits to Britain and to Europe; welcomes the Government's decision to make the national economic interest the key test for British entry; agrees with the Government that, barring some fundamental and unforeseen change in economic circumstances, making a decision to join during the current Parliament is not realistic; commends the actions of the Government to introduce a programme of economic reforms and practical assistance for British businesses which are both in the national economic interest and will help to create a real option of joining the single currency early in the next Parliament should Government, Parliament and the people so decide; and believes that the Government's policy will bring stability to business and reflects the long-term economic interests of the country.

I should like to set out the Government's position and deal with the issues that were raised by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on behalf of the Liberal party. The hon. Gentleman may find that he agrees with more of the Government's policy than he made out.

Our position on the single currency was set out in October by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. It is that, in principle, we see benefit in a successful monetary union and that a decision on membership of the single currency will be made in the national economic interest. Our decision on whether to join will be subject to the five economic tests that were set out by the Chancellor in October. If the benefits of membership are clear and unambiguous, the Government believe that Britain should be part of it. If we recommend joining the single currency, the decision will be subject to a referendum of the British people.

The test for us is based not on dogma but on economics—whether it is good for business, jobs and prosperity. Our economic interests will guide our decision. Of course there are constitutional implications, but we do not think that there is a constitutional bar to joining the single currency. Because of the constitutional implications, the economic benefits must be clear and

unambiguous. To rule out monetary union in principle, even if the economic benefits are undeniable, is not the right way to further our economic interests.

Mr. Bercow: Does the Chief Secretary think that Dr. Tietmeyer is right? If his prognosis is that entry to the European single currency will entail secession of sovereignty over direct taxation policies in due course, if not immediately, would that represent a constitutional bar to British entry? Perhaps I could have a yes or a no.

Mr. Darling: Dr. Tietmeyer is not a member of the Government, and taxation matters are for individual member states. Since we joined the Common Market, which became the European Community and is now the European Union, there has been an inevitable pooling of sovereignty. The hon. Gentleman was not a member of the previous Government, but I assume that he supported them. When they signed up to the single European Act in 1986, there was a significant pooling of sovereignty because it was recognised that that was in this country's interests. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members are becoming far too excited.

Mr. Darling: Europe excites Opposition Members in a way that puzzles many independent observers.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Darling: No, not just now.

To rule out monetary union in principle, although it would be in our economic interests, is not the right way to proceed. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, the potential benefits are obvious in terms of trade, transparency in costs and currency stability. Provided that the single currency is soundly based and successful, it is worth joining. However, before we could consider joining, we would need to be confident that we meet the five economic tests. There must be sustainable convergence between Britain and the single currency economies; sufficient flexibility to cope with economic change, which is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister emphasised the need to promote employability; and the reform of the labour and capital markets in the EU. We must also consider the effect on investment, the impact on the financial services industry and whether the single currency would be good for employment.

I now come to my first criticism of the Liberal position. As I have said, for us the economic tests are crucial and it is on the basis of meeting them that we would seek the endorsement of the people in a referendum. However, the decision has to follow the tests being met. The Liberals want us to decide in advance of the tests being satisfied. More than that, they are asking for a decision through a referendum that would be held perhaps a considerable time before we know whether the tests have been satisfied. Such a fundamental question should be asked on the basis of the facts and circumstances that prevail at the time at which people are asked to decide. Any significant gap between a referendum and joining the single currency would undermine the referendum's conclusion. The hon. Member for Gordon must explain how he can justify holding a referendum now, in a vacuum, before we know whether the convergence and the stability to which he referred have occurred. That would undermine the basis on which a referendum ought to be held.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The Minister makes a perfectly fair point. We say that a referendum should be held early rather than late and that Parliament's decision is arbitrary. We need to know what the Government are doing to achieve their tests and an explanation of how a referendum could be held at that point when it will take another three years to achieve membership. Is it not sensible to embark on a policy and then secure consent for the principle, with final details being determined by the Government? That is the only way to deliver.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman contradicts himself. He says that, before we join, there must be convergence and preparations for a single currency and that, after that, there can be a decision. Surely the correct way to proceed is for the Government to recommend to the British people that, on the basis of the economic tests, we should join, and to ask the people to agree. To ask people to agree now in a vacuum, before we know whether the economic tests have been satisfied, would completely undermine the basis of a referendum. Tomorrow morning, when the hon. Gentleman reads what he has said, he will agree that his position is nonsensical.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The Government have decided in principle to join the single currency; they believe that that it is the correct thing to do. Why can they not allow the British people to decide in principle whether it is the correct thing to do, or do the Government think that, somehow, the British people are sophisticated economic forecasters who can decide suddenly whether the five tests have been met?

Mr. Darling: The Government's position is that, if we meet the economic tests that the Chancellor set out in this House last October, and if the tests show that it would be in our interests to join the single currency, we shall recommend that to the British people and invite them to endorse that proposition in a referendum. What we cannot do is ask people to vote some years, possibly, in advance of that decision, without people knowing what it is that they are voting for.

Mr. Gill: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: No, I shall not at the moment.

The position that the Liberals are adopting is nonsensical.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: No. I should like to make some progress. I am aware of the fact that this is a Liberal debate and that many Liberal Members want to speak. I do not want to monopolise the time. I should prefer it if the hon. Gentleman reflected on the irrationality of asking people to vote before they knew whether the economic tests that we have set out have been satisfied. The people have to judge whether they believe that it is in this country's

[Mr. Darling]

interests to join any single currency and they cannot do that in the abstract; they cannot do it in the way that the Liberals suggest.

Mr. Gill: In terms of the question that should be asked of the British people, would it not be far more honest if the Government were to invite the British people to express an opinion on whether they wanted political union? It is totally unprecedented for there to be a single currency in any state that has not first created political union. Are not the right hon. Gentleman and his Government being disingenuous in putting the proposition of a single currency before the question of political union?

Mr. Darling: No one is advocating political union. I know that the hon. Gentleman believes that there is a constitutional bar to joining the single currency; I do not. The Government's position is that, although constitutional factors have to be considered, there is no constitutional bar to joining.

The Liberals say that they want us to join the single currency at the earliest possible opportunity, yet the hon. Member for Gordon said that, of course, there had to be stability. He said that we needed stability, yet he wants to join before we have it. He well knows—indeed, he made the point—that one of the problems that this country has faced over the years is that we have had instability: periods of boom and bust, of stop and go. We need to achieve economic stability, which is precisely what this Government's economic policies are being directed towards.

Our position is clear: we join when it is in our economic interest to do so and we are not at that stage now. Let us look, for example, at interest rates. Interest rates here are at 7.5 per cent. In Germany, they are at 3.3 per cent., reflecting the fact that it is at a different stage of the economic cycle. We need a period of stability and settled convergence before we can join, and our policies are designed to achieve that.

The Government's economic policy is to achieve long-term sustainable growth, stability, an end to the damaging cycle of boom and bust and to the high interest rates that are way above those in Europe; the hon. Member for Gordon is right about that. We are committed to low inflation, which is why we set our target of 2.5 per cent.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has been in the Chamber until now, but I may give way to him later.

That is why we gave the Bank of England operational independence and we now have the lowest—

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: Not just now.

We now have the lowest long-term interest rates for 33 years. It is beginning to bring the stability that we want. We need to avoid the historically higher rates that we have seen here compared with other member states in Europe. That is why we have put in place the code for fiscal stability and set out tough fiscal rules in the economic and fiscal strategy report.

It is all very well for the hon. Member for Gordon to say that, somehow, we are spending too much, but, every day, just about for the past 18 months, he has been telling us that we have not been spending enough. Today, he has changed his position altogether.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: They are both correct.

Mr. Darling: So the hon. Gentleman wants us to spend more and less at the same time.

The Government are committed to stability, which is why we have set prudent and cautious spending plans for the next three years and why we have made other changes, adopting tough fiscal rules to ensure we get the stability that has eluded successive Governments in the past. It is a policy which will ensure stability and a competitive pound over the medium term, because a sound currency is a product of a sound economy. Therefore, we are creating a stable economic environment. We shall get sustainable long-term growth, low inflation and sound public finances. That is good for the country in itself, as well as being a necessary pre-condition were we to join the single currency.

Mr. Gibb: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: Not just now.

The Liberals seem to be distracted by short-term pressures from the course that we have adopted. The hon. Member for Gordon said that one of the reasons why he wanted to join the single currency now was because of the difficulties with the value of the pound at present. That is precisely the wrong reason to join a single currency—to try to run away from short-term pressures here at the moment. That is no basis for any rational policy.

The hon. Member is right to say that the Government are committed to ensuring that we are able to make an informed choice at the appropriate time. He is right, too, to say that, when we took office, we found that no practical preparations had been made because of the paralysis that afflicted the previous Government over all matters European.

In five months' time, the single currency will become a reality. A German business selling products to France, for example, or the Netherlands will be able to do so without exchange rate risk and with lower transaction costs, which, of course, will pose a competitive challenge to companies in this country.

Next year, we shall begin to see the euro circulate and, in this country, some suppliers will price goods both in euros and sterling, so we need to prepare for the European single currency. It will affect us, which is why the Government have spent so much time over the past year or so preparing for the single currency. We have done that, so that our businesses are not placed at a competitive disadvantage because of the lack of preparations that we inherited.

That desire to ensure that we are part of the European Union—the hon. Member for Gordon is right: 50 per cent. of our trade is within Europe—led us to believe that we

had to embark on an intensive period of preparation, so that we could make a realistic decision on whether to join the single currency, probably at the beginning of the next Parliament, when the decision may be made.

At least one part of the Conservative position will be advanced from the Conservative Front-Bench team tonight. I am aware of the fact that the other half of the Conservative party has turned out tonight. It will be interesting to compare and contrast the two positions that will be advanced. I do not understand how the Conservatives can rule out joining for 10 years. Why 10? Why not five, 15 or 20? There is no logic in their position. It is based not on economic considerations or constitutional principle, but on narrow party political considerations. It is whatever will hold the Tory party together at the next election.

As we can see tonight, the Conservatives are completely split and bitterly divided. Narrow party interest will triumph over the national interest of this country. As long as that remains the case, they will never be able to govern in the national interest.

Our policy is to prepare and then decide. We are introducing a programme of economic reform and practical assistance for British business. Our policy is in the national interest: a prudent and balanced policy that puts our economic interests first and reflects the country's long-term interests.

7.58 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): This is obviously an extremely important topic and it is good for the House to have the chance to debate it discursively. I appreciate that this is a short debate and I want to be as quick as I can. The only point that I should make at the outset on the Liberal Democrat motion is to lament the death of irony. The Liberal Democrats can solemnly, at teatime, move a motion mourning the departure of parliamentary democracy and, at suppertime, move a motion that, on any footing, has a serious impact on parliamentary democracy.

It is important that, on this subject, the issues and arguments are properly ventilated and examined, and that we do not proceed by way of assertion, as has sometimes happened. It is important also that parties are clear about their position. To their credit, the Liberal Democrats have been straightforward; they have expressed their full commitment in principle to the single currency. That has been their position for a long time, and that is perfectly honourable; there is nothing discreditable about it. However, for some time, Labour Members have tried to have it both ways. We need only cast our minds back to April 1997, shortly before the general election, when an exclusive interview with the Prime Minister, the then Leader of the Opposition, appeared under the headline "My love for the £". That affair was as short-lived as the Chancellor of the Exchequer's love affair with prudence—not very long.

It was not long after the election that the Labour party became fully committed in principle. It has tried to hedge around monetary union since then, but we have only to go back to *Hansard* to read the Government's actual words. Labour Members did not try to fudge it then in the way that they have subsequently tried to do. The Chancellor was admirably explicit; indeed, he was quite boastful and very pleased with himself. He said:

> "We are the first British Government to declare for the principle of monetary union, the first to state that there is no overriding constitutional bar to membership".—[*Official Report*, 27 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 588.]

The Government have tried to deny it since, but that was a clear, dogmatic commitment in principle to joining the single currency. They have taken a curious path to get to that point, but it is now the clear, unequivocal position—a dogmatic commitment in principle, subject only to technical issues of timing. Last week, the Chancellor went all the way to "Sun valley" to reassert that dogmatic commitment in principle.

Today's debate allows us to expose the divide between the dogmatic approach of Labour and the Liberal Democrats and the pragmatic approach of the Conservative party—*[Interruption.]* I will cheerfully elaborate on that. The Labour Government are committed in principle, although they acknowledge that it would be disastrous for Britain—the Chief Secretary in effect admitted that—at the present time. As we know, the Liberal Democrats favour entry at the earliest possible opportunity. The Conservatives' pragmatic approach is to monitor how the euro performs over an economic cycle, in good times as well as bad; only then should responsible politicians start to come to a decision on whether it is right for Britain to join. That is why we have made it clear that we oppose Britain's joining the euro during this Parliament and the next. That is the pragmatic approach.

The Chief Secretary sought to have some merriment around the idea of a period of 10 years. I have to tell him that the Conservative party has never talked about ruling out joining for 10 years—

Mr. Darling: Yes, 10 years.

Mr. Maude: The right hon. Gentleman is quite deliberately perpetrating a myth. We have said that we rule out joining for this Parliament and the next—*[Interruption.]* We do not know how long that will be. It is wrong to suggest that ruling out something for the lifetime of a Parliament is alien and difficult for politicians—it is the sort of period in which politicians operate. That is the position we adopted and the one with which we will stay.

Mr. Darling: Does the right hon. Gentleman foresee any circumstances in which a Conservative Government would ever join the single currency?

Mr. Maude: At the moment I cannot, but I am not arrogant enough to believe that I know what the position will be for all time. Serious economic issues rule out joining in this Parliament and the next, and the right hon. Gentleman has referred to some of them. The principal one is cyclical convergence. It is no accident that, for many years, the pound has had an extraordinary degree of stability against the dollar. That exchange rate stability reflects the interest rate tracking between the two economies, which in turn reflects the fact that our economic cycles—I have never heard a good reason for this; it is just a simple fact—are closely aligned. If Britain were to join the single currency without that cyclical convergence, we would have the wrong interest rate.

[Mr. Maude]

It is all very well for the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) to say that, if we were to join, we would have lower interest rates—I accept that, if we joined today, we would have lower interest rates because Germany, France and the other founder members of euroland—the EMU 11—have a different economic cycle. They have the appropriate interest rate for their economic cycle and we have what the Bank of England currently believes to be the appropriate interest rate for Britain. That shows that we are at a different stage of the economic cycle.

To say that we should have a lower interest rate when the state of our economy demands a higher one is absurd naivety or deliberate disingenuity. It is as fatuous to say that as it is to argue that, at the next point in the cycle, when we may have low interest rates but the EMU 11 have a higher interest rate, it would automatically be right for us also to have that higher interest rate. On the basis of what the hon. Member for Gordon has argued so far, in those circumstances he would argue that it would not be right to join because it would mean higher interest rates for Britain. The point is that, unless there were sustainable cyclical convergence, Britain would have the wrong interest rate. I do not believe that the House should vote for Britain to have the wrong interest rate at any time in the future—

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Does the right hon. Gentleman not recognise that we want to join a club that has a more successful record than Britain of securing lower interest rates and lower inflation over a long period? Can he name a significant period during which the average interest rate in, for example, Germany has been significantly higher than in Britain at any stage of the cycle?

Mr. Maude: The hon. Gentleman is talking about our joining a club that does not exist—*[Interruption.]* The euro does not exist; EMU will not come into operation until 1 January next year. On any footing, it will take time to be tested and explored, to determine how it works. None of us knows at this stage whether it will be a strong currency or a weak currency; none of us knows how the pound will behave in relation to it; none of us knows how quickly or otherwise it may become an international reserve currency, or even whether it will become one at all. Those are all important unanswered questions. It is responsible and—I repeat—pragmatic to take time to explore how EMU works and develops and to determine whether it works in a way that makes it possible for Britain to join.

The Treasury's own figures show that, far from there being cyclical convergence with the founder members—the EMU 11—our economy is negatively correlated. That may change and, in many ways, it may be helpful to Britain if it does. The EMU 11 will be, and already is, an important trading partner for Britain. However, it must be right for Britain to want to see what happens—if it happens at all—and how quickly it happens before we rush into any decision.

Without there being any evidence that cyclical convergence is happening, surely that should be the end of the story for the time being. It is not practical for Britain to join a single currency when our interest rates and economic cycle are so divergent. The reasons for that cyclical divergence from Europe and why we are not quickly moving together are clear. There are important structural differences, which in many respects are to the economic advantage of Britain. Our trade flows are different. They are not concentrated—in the way that they are in many of the founder countries of EMU—within the EMU area; they are much more global. That is not a statement of value; I am not saying whether it is good or bad; it is simply a fact. Such facts make a difference to the decision that has to be made.

Before those matters are concluded, it is important that there should be a proper assessment of convergence costs, for example. What is the estimated cost to British business of converting to the euro and of our joining the single currency? Has such an assessment been made? Has one been made by the European Commission? If the Chief Secretary can tell me that such an assessment has been made and that he has a figure that he can reveal now to the House, I shall gladly give way to him. If he, like the Government, is committed in principle to joining the single currency, he should at least be able to tell us the price tag on doing so.

Although many assessments—of greater or lesser reliability—have been made of the advantages in transaction costs of our joining the single currency, so far as I know, neither the Treasury nor the European Commission has assessed the cost of converting to the euro. It is quite important that such an assessment is made. Assessments made by others range from £20 billion to £50 billion. In the absence of the Treasury's own estimate, will the Chief Secretary confirm that that is the right range?

There has already been some discussion—I am confident that there will be more—about the constitutional effects of Britain's joining the single currency. The Chief Secretary said that no one was seeking to create a political union, but I must disillusion him on that. There are some—I make no criticism of them, as it is a perfectly honourable thing to seek to do—among our partners in Europe who wish to create a political union—[HON. MEMBERS: "Who?"] Chancellor Kohl, for one. He is perfectly open about it. I am not making a charge of conspiracy against him.

Those of us who, like me, were involved at the early stages in discussions and negotiations on the Maastricht treaty know that political union was very much the dominant motive for the German political establishment pressing for the single currency. I make no criticism of them for seeking that objective—which is a perfectly honourable one—and they have been very open about it. However, the Chief Secretary should clearly realise that there are some who wish a common currency to be created specifically for that reason.

It has never been clear to me how a currency union can exist without a political union. However, I do not claim omniscience in the matter, and retain a readiness to be persuaded by experience that a currency union can be created without a political one. Some good friends of mine—some of whom are in the Chamber—earnestly believe that such a union can be created. I respect that belief and am willing to be persuaded, by experience, over time. The need for time is another reason for Britain not

joining the currency in this Parliament and the next, so that we can begin to see the effects on political union of our being part of a monetary union on the continent.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am sure that I will not persuade my right hon. Friend. Nevertheless, I remind him of the experience, between 1923 and the early 1970s, of the Irish Free State and the United Kingdom. Although they were in monetary union throughout that time, I do not think that President de Valera entered into any type of political union with this country.

Mr. Maude: My right hon. and learned Friend and I have discussed that matter before, and we are unlikely to reach agreement on it. There is a profound difference between a small country, as an exercise of its sovereignty, temporarily pegging its currency to that of a larger country and the single currency.

There was not a monetary union then. The Irish were in effect treating the pound sterling as a gold standard. The nearest modern equivalent is Hong Kong and the US dollar. The Hong Kong Government, under British sovereignty, pegged their currency to the US dollar, and that arrangement has continued under Chinese sovereignty. However—to continue the analogy—I do not think that anyone is contending that the Chinese leadership has conceded sovereignty of Hong Kong to the United States.

There are other examples on the continent—[HON. MEMBERS: "Precisely."] The Liberal Democrats utterly fail to take the point. Establishing a single currency is very different from a small country pegging its currency to that of a larger one. The Netherlands and Germany provide an example on the continent of the latter arrangement. However, it is very different to propose creating a genuine monetary union that is not part of an exercise of sovereignty that is revocable at any stage—unlike the pegging of Ireland's currency to sterling, Hong Kong's currency to the US dollar and, in effect, the Netherlands' currency to the deutschmark. Even the Liberals must be able to see that those arrangements are different.

Mr. Bercow: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Maude: I am tempted by my hon. Friend, but I want to press on. This is a short debate, and I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak.

I am therefore not prepared, arrogantly and dogmatically, to say that I know for all time that I am right. I believe that the right stance is to say, "No, we will not join in this Parliament or the next." At the end of that time, there will be some experience of how the single currency has worked in practice among economies that, at first sight, are well-equipped to work together in a monetary union. At that stage, decisions can be made on the basis of not perfect but better knowledge than we will have at any stage in this Parliament or the next.

What should the United Kingdom be doing meanwhile? Businesses in Britain should certainly be preparing for 1 January, as any business that is trading with the EMU 11 will have to accommodate use of the new single currency by them and, eventually, the euro. However, preparation is very different from the Government pushing businesses into sinking money into preparing for British membership of the single currency. The Government themselves have accepted that, although they are committed in principle to the currency, it may not be possible.

Some suspect that a process is in train of making Britain's membership of the single currency inevitable by encouraging businesses to sink money in it, so that people say, "We have already spent a lot of money on it. We may as well do it." The Government perhaps give the game away in their own amendment, which states that the House

> "commends the actions of the Government to introduce a programme of . . . practical assistance for British businesses which . . . will help to create a real option of joining the single currency early in the next Parliament should Government . . . so decide".

It would be quite wrong, when investment is already scarce—the Government's own figures show that investment will fall over the rest of this Parliament, with all the implications that that will have for jobs—for British business to be lured into sinking money into unproductive investment, for an eventuality that by no means is certain to happen. The only effect of business investing that money is to make that eventuality marginally more likely. I emphatically tell Ministers that, although the politics of that may work for them, the economics will not work for business.

I ask the Government to give an absolute undertaking that businesses will not be encouraged to sink money in that manner. I support Ministers in encouraging businesses to prepare for creation of the single currency, on 1 January 1999.

Mr. Darling: That is a change.

Mr. Maude: The only change is that we have begun to be able to penetrate the mists surrounding the Government's intentions, to try to discern what Government policy is aimed at achieving. It has not been at all clear whether the Government's extremely expensive preparations have been devoted to encouraging businesses to prepare for creation of the currency on 1 January 1999—that will happen; it is a fact—or to prepare for our possible future membership. I ask Ministers to give an absolute undertaking that that effort, money and propagandising—it is a perfectly proper use of the word—will not be used in that way.

The single currency may well work for its founder continental members—the EMU 11—in the short to medium term, but that does not mean that it will certainly work for Britain. In the absence of cyclical convergence, which is an absolute precondition for Britain's successful membership, the House should not be discussing the issue. Membership is simply not a practical possibility. If the decision to join is made at some stage, it must be on the basis of clear information, following properly funded campaigns for both sides of the argument.

Since the Labour party came to office a year ago, we have seen three referendums on the mainland. Experience of their being run remotely satisfactorily is lacking.

Mr. Darling *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Maude: The Chief Secretary is clearly having difficulty counting. Referendums in Scotland, Wales and London seem to me to make three. On each occasion,

[Mr. Maude]

legislation has not been published before the referendum, so the public have not been able to see the pig in a poke. Campaigns against the Government's view have not been properly funded, which has been objectionable and deeply unsatisfactory. If we reach the point at which there is a referendum on the single currency, it must be conducted properly. We shall look to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to make commitments on that. In summary, the Liberal Democrat motion and the Government amendment are equally flawed.

8.21 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am happy to participate in this debate and to support the Government's amendment. I do so as a positive, pro-European who believes that, in the longer run, Britain does not have an economic future outside the single currency. I welcome the opportunity to air some of the arguments.

When I talk to people in my constituency and observe opinion poll evidence on matters surrounding the single currency, I am struck by the fact that, fundamentally, people in Britain are not hostile to the idea or Euro-sceptic. They are concerned, fearful and lack an understanding of what the single currency will mean to them and their families. They therefore want the issue to be opened up.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The hon. Gentleman mentioned opinion poll evidence. Is he aware that, in the latest Gallup poll, in which people were asked whether, if there were a referendum, they would vote to replace the pound with a single currency, only 33 per cent. said yes, 65 per cent. said no and 2 per cent. were undecided?

Mr. Rammell: As with all statistics and opinion polls, it depends which one is quoted to support one's argument. There has been a detectable shift in opinion in polls since the election. Attitudes have softened; there is greater support for the concept of a single currency, and more people are prepared to accept that they are undecided.

Mr. Bercow: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in the poll that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) has just quoted, no fewer than 58 per cent. of Labour voters declared that they were opposed when asked, "Would you support the abolition of the pound in favour of a single European currency?" Even his party's supporters are opposed to his position on the subject.

Mr. Rammell: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, at the start of the four-week referendum campaign in 1975 on Britain's membership of the European Community, opinion polls showed a 2:1 majority against the idea, but, by the end of the four weeks, when the issues had come out into the open and people had understood the arguments, the position was reversed.

I welcome the opportunity to support and to restate the Government's position, which is very positive, clear and a breath of fresh air compared with what went on under the previous Conservative Government. I pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats for calling this debate in order to open up the discussion, although, as will become clear later in my speech, I cannot support—indeed, I disagree with—several of their policy prescriptions.

The debate is helpful in underlining the fundamental mess of the Conservative party on this issue—even to this day. I do not say that as pure party political knockabout; I am not one of those who believe that the Labour party will be in power for ever and a day. It may be in government for 15, 20 or 25 years, but, at some stage, the Conservative party will return to power. If it does so with today's split policy on Europe, woe betide this country's economic interests.

Let us address some of the arguments that Conservative Members have made in the debate. The genuine position was put forward by the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) who, if I understood him, was arguing in favour of complete British withdrawal from the European Union. He said that the question in a referendum should be whether the British people support political union. If he believes, as I am sure he does, that the answer would be no, and if he believes, as I know he does from previous comments in the Chamber, that political union is already taking place, he is clearly arguing for such withdrawal. It is very worrying that there is still such a firmly held strand of opinion in the Conservative party.

The shadow Chancellor then accused the Labour party and the Labour Government of inconsistency on the issue. To anyone who remembers the election campaign, in which, day after day, a different Conservative Front Bencher and a different Conservative Back Bencher came out with their individual positions on the Conservative party manifesto, that is an example of the pot calling the kettle black. Before the Conservative party lectures the Labour party on consistency, it needs to put its own house in order.

I was very taken by what the shadow Chancellor said about the Conservative party—allegedly—taking a pragmatic stance, waiting for a full economic cycle to elapse in order to judge the effectiveness and success of the single currency. We can have a debate on whether two full terms means 10 years or eight years, but, whatever the answer, we are talking about a long time. Are Conservative Members really suggesting—perhaps this can be picked up in the winding-up speeches—that if the single currency is up and running, strong and successful and, consequently, we must pay a 2 per cent. premium on our interest rates to protect the value of the pound outside such a single currency, they would still argue that we should stay outside? That would be putting ideological dogma before common sense.

I should like to state the case for the single currency—it must be made. Despite what Conservative Members said repeatedly for years when they were in government, the single currency will go ahead. They told people and businesses that there was no need to prepare for it. There is a case in this debate for their admitting that they were fundamentally wrong. Eleven countries are launching the single currency with an unprecedented degree of economic convergence. Let us look at the facts.

Mr. Gummer: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that this is a serious matter which ought to be discussed seriously? It is a little difficult for those of us who have been totally consistent to be told that we have been inconsistent by a member of a party whose leader asked

us to withdraw from the European Union on several occasions during several election campaigns. Whatever the divisions, they ought to be treated seriously. He does his case no good at all by making such points. He can be reminded about the enormous divisions in the Labour party. Some of its members are deeply opposed to the single currency—and perfectly reasonably so, since it is a matter of some importance. It would help the House if the hon. Gentleman addressed the issues.

Mr. Rammell: There are clearly different strands of opinion across the parties on the issue, but I was not the one who introduced the issue of inconsistency into the debate. It was introduced by the shadow Chancellor. The remarks of the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) would be far better addressed to his Front-Bench team.

I was addressing the issue of economic convergence. Since the Maastricht treaty was agreed, average Government deficits across the 15 EU countries have fallen from 6.5 to 1.6 per cent. To pretend, as some Conservative Members still do, that such convergence has not occurred and is not continuing is not an economic argument but a political argument in principle against the concept of the single currency.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman surely would not claim that the convergence criteria were met. No objective empirical analysis suggests that. No commentator—even the pro-European ones—would suggest that the criteria were not fudged.

Mr. Rammell: Conservative attacks on convergence criteria have been directed at Belgium and Italy. I am prepared to bet that if Belgium and Italy had not been included in the first wave, the Conservatives would simply have moved the goalposts, and argued against other countries. The true position of those who hold that convergence has not taken place was best summed up by the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) who said:

> "I find the word fudge is now being used in negotiations. That is obviously just a cover for those who never want a Single Currency, or even a European Union."

Let us consider the positive case for the single currency. One role of politics and government is to try to give ordinary people greater control over their lives and the decisions that affect them. The single currency is first and foremost about tackling currency speculation and the instability that flows from it, which can be tremendously damaging to a country's economy. Around 90 per cent. of transactions on foreign exchange markets are not about imports and exports, or trading and business, but are made for speculative gain. We know how damaging that can be. We all remember September 1992, when interest rates went up 4 per cent. in one day while billions of pounds were being lost in a futile attempt to protect sterling against speculation.

The crux of the matter is that if pooling some sovereignty allows us greater control over our economic affairs and the value of our currency, it is a price worth paying. I was disappointed by the intervention of the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) because I intended to quote the concise and effective argument on sovereignty that he advanced when I shared a platform with him recently to discuss the single currency. He said that sovereignty without power is meaningless, and he was absolutely right. He cited our sovereign ability to declare war on the United States, adding that we would never do so—no matter what the circumstances, or the justification—because we do not have the power to win. That argument applies just as well to sovereign control of the currency if we have no ability to control the currency or to gain stability.

Mr. Hayes: May I test the hon. Gentleman's philosophical position? He has said that a right is not worth having unless one exercises it. That position could apply to an enormous number of political and personal rights, but not to exercise a right surely does not make it not worth having.

Mr. Rammell: If we can achieve our end more effectively by pooling some sovereignty than we can by standing alone, it is worth considering it.

Mr. Bercow: When the United Kingdom was forcibly ejected from the extended recession mechanism, we exercised sovereignty for the betterment of our commercial interest by cutting interest rates, which we were powerless to do within the mechanism, of which the hon. Gentleman was a strong supporter.

Mr. Rammell: I do not want to rake over the coals of the previous Conservative Government's problems. A balanced judgment needs to be made. If we pool sovereignty and join the single currency, the downside is loss of immediate operational control of interest rates within our national boundaries, but the benefits of the single currency will outweigh that loss. Among the benefits are reduced transaction costs, and the European Commission estimates that the UK would save about £3 billion a year. Price transparency is another advantage. When we enter the euro, we will be able to make genuine comparisons between prices, ending the nonsensical situation in which a Ford Fiesta costs 50 per cent. more in Britain than in Portugal, for no justifiable or logical reason.

The red herring always offered by opponents of economic and monetary union is that the single currency will remove our ability to set our tax levels. Nothing in the Maastricht treaty justifies that view. The treaty seeks to establish Government deficits at the sensible level of 3 per cent. of gross domestic product. That still means that member states can have a high-tax, high-spend sensible deficit, or a low-tax, low-spend sensible deficit. The false argument about taxes needs to be nailed.

Before coming here tonight, I took the trouble to re-read my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's October statement. The passage of time sometimes affects the memory, and that statement was more clear and positive on the single currency than I had remembered. The Chancellor said that we supported the principle of the single currency, that we wanted it to succeed and that we recognised that there would be significant gains in terms of trade, transparency of costs and currency stability. He said that there is no constitutional bar to joining. He said that we were not convergent with the economies of the rest of Europe, particularly because of our interest rates, and that sustainable convergence was required.

[Mr. Rammell]

The Chancellor also said that preparations for the single currency had barely begun because of the splits in the previous Conservative Government, and because of their heads-in-the-sand approach. I have read polls stating that only 14 per cent. of businesses are preparing for the single currency, which emphasises how right the Government are to address preparation. Once preparation and convergence have occurred, support for the principle of the single currency should mean that we recommend entry early in the next Parliament.

The Liberal Democrats are trying to play a constructive and supportive role, on this matter and others. However, constructive criticism can be effective only if it is credible. That requires it to be based in the politics of the real world, and I found the Liberal arguments flawed on several counts. For those of us who believe that we should participate in the single currency, it would be the worst of all worlds to time the referendum wrongly so that the argument was lost.

The Liberal Democrat motion fails to address the lack of convergence between our economy and the economies of the rest of the EU. There is a gap in interest rates of 3 to 4 per cent. To converge suddenly would mean a dramatic fall in interest rates, which would create unsustainable consumer demand that would fuel inflation and probably initiate an unsustainable housing boom. There would be massive destabilisation, which is the opposite of what the currency is intended to achieve. The right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) said recently that if the Prime Minister set a date to join the single currency,

"the pound would come down tomorrow, interest rates would come down next week"—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 1069.].

That is a simplistic view.

In a spirit of friendship and understanding, I believe that instead of arguing for a precipitate decision on the single currency, the Liberal Democrats could spend some time on persuading their own supporters of the case for it. The irony is that the Liberal Democrats sell themselves as the most pro-European party while all available evidence suggests that Liberal Democrat supporters are the most hostile to and sceptical about the single currency.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In support of that, in the poll to which I alluded earlier, the figure for Lib Dem supporters of economic and monetary union was 33 per cent., the same as the national average. The figure for Lib Dem supporters who opposed it was 65 per cent. The hon. Gentleman is right.

Mr. Rammell: Counselling is available for people who indulge in too much opinion poll reading. I will give some evidence. Lib Dem supporters have been shown to be hostile to the single currency. In October 1996, a MORI poll showed Lib Dem supporters to be more likely than those of any other party to support ruling out joining the single currency in the first wave of entrants. The NOP exit poll at the general election showed Lib Dem voters to be 37 per cent. more likely than Labour voters to say that Britain should never join the single currency. I highlight that because we all have a job to do in educating people, opening up the issues and explaining what the single currency is about and why it is important to our economic future. The Liberal Democrats should spend some time on that.

The single currency is the most important strategic economic issue that this country will face in a generation. In many senses, the way in which we ensure that Britain faces up to the decision will be one of the defining judgments on the new Labour Government. I am confident that our tactics and strategy will enable the country to face up to this hugely important issue.

8.40 pm

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): I agree with the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) about the crucial importance of this topic, but I have some questions about his implied claims on the alleged consistency and unity of his party. I join him in congratulating the Liberal Democrats on giving us an opportunity to debate this crucial subject.

To say that we must have a clear debate is a commonplace; everyone says it. Sadly, we get a series of monologues, a dialogue of the deaf. It is the same old faces in the Chamber, with a few exceptions. We make little progress. There is a debate going on, but unfortunately it is only in my party. Whether it is productive is another matter, but at least there is a dialogue.

The contrast with the Labour party is interesting. When the debate started, one or two well-known troublemaking Labour anti-European Back Benchers were here. Whether through the influence of the Whips, spin doctors or whatever, they took better advice, and have departed the field.

Apart from the divisions among Back Benchers, there are divisions in the Labour Cabinet. It is also clear that the Prime Minister's real concerns are not about his Cabinet or parliamentary colleagues but about Mr. Murdoch and *The Sun*. That is obvious from the extraordinary performance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, aping Mr. Blair's performance two year years ago when he tripped off to Queensland on the instructions of Mr. Murdoch. This time it was Mr. Brown to Idaho, but at the expense of the British taxpayer.

We need this debate. I want to make my position clear at the outset. We must recognise that the euro is beginning to happen. It comes into force on 1 January, but the impact on decision making is already with us. The fact that we are not in the euro 11 decision-making process is of significance to this country. Whichever side of the debate one is on, it is difficult to deny that we are affected already by those decisions. It is incontrovertible that we must carefully monitor how the euro develops from now, today—not 1 January or 2002 or some other date, but now. We must watch how it works, and how it impacts on Britain.

It surely makes sense to keep all the options open. We should keep the "sooner or later" options open, subject only to two criteria. The first is the referendum, on which just about all hon. Members now agree. Secondly, the decisions and recommendations of the Government and of the House, when they are made, must be in the national interest.

The phrase "in the national interest" strikes me as an otiose platitude. Who comes into Parliament or politics without taking account of the national interest?

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government harp on about it, but it is the concrete decision and the perception that we have to understand. We must all grasp the nettle. Simply mouthing the idea of the national interest takes the debate not one inch further forward.

"Bete noire" is perhaps too strong a phrase, but my particular problem is with those who seek to wrap themselves in the Union flag with the idea of saving the pound. They assume that they are patriotic, and the rest of us are not. That strikes home to me strongly. I left a very happy, secure job in the Foreign Office, with what I hoped would be a happy future, precisely because I was deeply concerned about the threat to this country from the last Labour Government and the way that they were leading us.

Because of all this flurry about saving the pound, the Union Jack and all the rest of it, with some immodesty I was moved to look up my maiden speech. Its theme was used later by a weekly newspaper with the headline, "Stand up and speak for Britain". I therefore accept no suggestion from any hon. Member or anyone else on the other side of the debate that, if I take a positive attitude to the possibility that we might join the European single currency, whether sooner or perhaps a little later, there is something missing from my sense of patriotism or national identity. Far from it.

I believe that we must protect our country by the most sensible means. Simply to mouth, "Let us save the pound," is no way to protect the national interest of this country which we all hold so dear. If it were, the record of both Conservative and Labour Governments on saving the pound is not happy. After the war, £1 could buy $4. Now one would be lucky to get $1.50. Since 1960, the pound has dropped to 58 per cent. of its value against the dollar in 1960; against the deutschmark to 24 per cent; against the Japanese yen to 19 per cent; against the Swiss franc to 19 per cent. If that is what saving the pound means, I should like to find a more effective way of preserving the national interest.

Mr. Alan Clark: I am interested in the implication of what my hon. Friend says, which is that the value of the pound must be sustained and is something worth maintaining. Most Labour Members, and many Conservative Members, never cease to complain that the value of the pound is too high. Where does he sit in that debate?

Sir Raymond Whitney: Those who argue that saving the value of the pound is all that matters must make that case.

My point is that we must work towards an effective economic position. Two separate issues are involved: the long-term position of the currency, to which I have referred, and its tactical immediate position. It is now fashionable to believe that a lower pound is better. I do not subscribe to that view in the long term; I do not believe that we can devalue our way into prosperity—leaving aside the arguments we have had in the past year about the import problems associated with a high pound.

The idea that we can enjoy the freedom of remaining outside the single currency, allow our pound to devalue and all live happily ever after is extremely dangerous. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) and I have agreed strongly on that point in recent years; it is one of the things that have held us together on this side of the political debate and of the Chamber. We believe in sound finance.

I am always surprised when the good housekeeping criteria—which the EMU criteria represent—appear to be such anathema to some of my right hon. and hon. Friends. They seem to want the privilege of devaluing the pound, putting up Government spending, and so on. That surely is not a policy which should unite Conservatives.

Emotional appeals to sovereignty are misleading and dangerous. They do not help this country's national interests. It must be obvious that no country—certainly not a great trading nation of this size—can be immune to international pressures and the effects of the global economy. Ever since the first world war—at the very latest—Britain has been vulnerable to international economic pressures. No Chancellor of the Exchequer can stand at the Dispatch Box and pronounce a Budget or a comprehensive spending review while remaining oblivious to, or careless of, what is happening in the world and the many pressures on sterling and our trading position.

Our national identity is not a question of sterling as such, but of how British interests are best advanced. I believe that those interests will be seriously endangered if and when the euro currency is successfully launched and becomes stable. Our famous pound would then be subject to instability and speculation. No one would argue that interest rates would be significantly higher—they would rise by two or three percentage points. Therefore, the case for keeping open the option for our entry must be overwhelming. I hope that we will consider that option much more calmly, both in my party and in the Labour party. The Government are seriously endangering that possibility.

The previous Government, to which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made such a great contribution, left a tremendous economic legacy to the incoming Labour Government last May. That legacy is being quickly squandered. In the past few days, report after report has made it clear that the rosy hue in which the economy was cloaked, or befogged, by the Chancellor last week is a mirage. An article in *The Times* of yesterday states that Britain has again become

"the sick man of Europe."

Two or three leading financial companies have analysed Britain's economic prospects and found them to be very worrying. If we are not careful, and if the Government continue in the way they have begun, having quickly abandoned the righteous cloak of Conservative economic policy that they pretended to assume, there will be no option. There will be no point in the Financial Secretary or the Chancellor of the Exchequer saying that they will recommend that Britain joins the single currency in 2002. Our European partners will not want us, because the gap will be too wide, and that option will be closed.

As to the question whether political union automatically follows EMU, the answer must certainly be, not necessarily. Of course it could, but I know very few people in this country or in continental Europe who want anything like a centralised state. People fuss about what

[Sir Raymond Whitney]

the word "federal" means, but I hope that we have reached a more adult stage in the debate. The idea of a centralised state has very few supporters.

Mr. Alan Clark: The Chancellor of Germany.

Sir Raymond Whitney: No, my right hon. Friend is wrong.

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend may have noticed one supporter of Britain's being part of a much more centralised state. Articles in *The Daily Telegraph* suggested that Britain would be better off being dictated to by Washington rather than being a partner in the European Union.

Sir Raymond Whitney: My right hon. Friend does me and the House a service, but I shall not be tempted to discuss the damage that Mr. Black and Mr. Murdoch have done to the interests of this country.

We believe that Britain has the nous, the political experience, the wisdom and the stability to belong to a European Union that is active and effective, and that can introduce a single currency without sliding into a centralised state. Far from being unpatriotic, that is true patriotism; that is to believe in Britain, as I do most sincerely. Those on the other side of the debate—many of them my right hon. and hon. Friends—who think that we shall be somehow lured, trapped and sunk unwittingly by a centralised state do us a great disservice. I hope that they will think carefully about the implications of their position.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that a large number of right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. Unless contributions are much shorter, many hon. Members will be very disappointed.

8.57 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I shall try to bear your words in mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

This has been an intriguing debate. From the Liberals we have heard the usual vacuous waffle. The idea proposed by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), that the European central bank can somehow be made more democratic or more accountable, absolutely beggars belief. What are we going to do? Are we to have elected bankers running it? Are we going to run it along the lines of, say, the Church of England, with the Prime Ministers of western Europe appointing the bankers? I do not recall the Church of England being held up as a symbol of democracy. It is a shame that the hon. Gentleman is not in his seat to intervene.

The contribution from the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) was an attack on Maastricht and everything that goes with it. I, too, am opposed to the European single currency. However, when the previous Government negotiated what became Single European Act 1985, the right hon. Gentleman was a Member of Parliament, and I do not remember him manning the barricades at that time. He was involved in the negotiations in the lead-up to the signing of the Maastricht treaty, and he then put his name on the bottom of that treaty.

It is all very well to be worried now, but the time to have called a halt to Maastricht, the convergence criteria, the stability pact and everything else, was before the treaty was signed, not five, six, or seven years later, when the European juggernaut is already hurtling toward us at speed.

To pick up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), I believe that an overwhelming majority of people in this country are opposed to Maastricht and to the single currency. My hon. Friend drew attention to what happened in 1975, during the last referendum on Europe. I hope that the parallel will not be too close next time around, but what happened in 1975 is that there was a U-turn by the Labour Cabinet very late in the day, which either swung behind it many Labour party members and trade unionists, who were naturally fairly opposed to membership of the Common Market, or at least sowed the seeds of confusion and division.

In 1975, there were no spending limits on the two campaigns during that referendum. I was only 11 years old at the time, but I remember how poverty-stricken the no campaign was. The yes campaign was flooded with money, as multinational companies, business men and banks poured in contributions, with the result that it was a hugely powerful, well-financed campaign which had an enormous impact at the end of the day.

Let us not forget that, in 1975, we had already been taken into the common market by the Conservatives, even though they had had no mandate to do so. During the referendum campaign, a feeling of paranoia was sown—a feeling that, even if we had not wanted to go in in the first place, to come out would mean economic catastrophe. I am sure that an attempt will be made to sow those seeds again, but I doubt whether it will work as successfully the second time.

My hon. Friend also referred to the possibility of tax harmonisation. It is true that the Maastricht treaty makes no mention of tax harmonisation, but it has to be admitted that, under the auspices of the Economic and Finance Council, there have been extensive discussions on that subject. In an answer to a question I put some time ago, and which I should perhaps have brought with me today, the Treasury refused to rule out future discussions on the harmonisation of income tax. There is plenty to worry about in that respect.

I do not deny that there are genuine euro-idealists on both sides of the House. I am not a little Englander; I am opposed to the single currency because I am an internationalist and because, sentimental old fool that I am, I believe in democratic accountability, not only in Britain, but for the people of Spain, Belgium, Germany, France and everywhere else in western and eastern Europe.

Over the past 10 or 15 years, among Labour party members and Labour Members of Parliament, there has undoubtedly been an increase in support generally for the European ideal, and an increase in the number of European idealists in the party. The reasons are, to some extent, understandable. I remember that, years ago, opposition to the common market was almost a Labour

party badge of identity; the Labour party was automatically associated in people's minds with opposition to the common market, whereas the Tory party, under the leadership of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), was completely supportive.

It is not too difficult to perceive the seeds of the shift in Labour's attitude toward Europe: we were stripped of much of our confidence by four election defeats, and there was a tendency to look to Europe to help us out in many ways. There was a feeling that the democratic process was starting to fall apart, and that it could be revitalised through Europe. There was a feeling that the economy was going down the chute, and that it could be pulled out by Europe. Those beliefs were completely illusory, but it is understandable why people held them.

However, even among European enthusiasts and idealists on the Labour Benches and outside the House, once they get into the nitty-gritty and the detail of the Maastricht treaty and see what the reality is, all of them—at least the ones that I know—run a mile. They have good cause: the Maastricht treaty is a charter for taking political power away from the people and away from voters, and handing it to a tiny, unelected and unaccountable elite, who sit in a boardroom in Bonn or Frankfurt. To be frank, it does not matter where they sit—they can sit in London, for all I care. The fact is that they are unelected and unaccountable; they cannot be held to account by the voters of this country or of any other.

That brings me to the most important point that I want to make. The Maastricht treaty, and, for that matter, the stability pact—in fact, all the treaties that have resulted from the treaty of Paris, which was signed in the late 1940s and is the original, rather than the treaty of Rome—were concerned with a political venture.

Maastricht is a political treaty. It does not consist merely of some obscure, "ivory tower" economic argument that does not have much impact on people's lives, on Parliament and its decisions, on the legislature and on the Executive; it is a political venture. What it means is handing over the levers of power to a small group of unelected individuals—a political and economic elite who, as I have said, are accountable to no one.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Europe's political elite has had a few scares over the past 60 or 70 years or more. Following mass demobilisation after the first world war, for the first time in Britain's history the men who came home from the trenches and the women who came out of the munitions factories elected more than 100 Labour Members of Parliament. That caused a scare. Four years later, there was the general strike.

In 1945, there was a real socialist Government under the leadership of the greatest peacetime Prime Minister the country has ever seen—Clement Attlee. That Government created 3 million jobs in three years, and created the national health service, the finest socialist venture that the country has ever known. They took into public ownership utilities such as the mines, in which the number of men who had been killed was legion. Safety records went through the roof after nationalisation.

I believe that all that gave cause for concern to the political and economic elite. What the establishment has always detested is the sight of ordinary working people using their economic and political power, thinking for themselves, holding Government to account and keeping Governments out when they do not like them. Through Maastricht, members of the establishment have found a way of removing that power and handing it to their mates in the boardrooms, and to the bankers they appoint and then stick in the European central bank in Frankfurt. That is the top and bottom of the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. Alan Clark: What the hon. Gentleman has articulated is the Labour party's traditional attitude, over a long period, to the European Community. What does he think altered that? He knows that, although his hon. Friends around him may instinctively feel the same, they will no longer say so. How does he account for that? He has given us—briefly encapsulated—the history of his party; what does he think has happened to his party now?

Mr. Cryer: I think that I made that clear earlier. Four election defeats drained away some of the confidence that the Labour party had before 1979. As I said, however, even among the European idealists on the Labour Benches, the vast majority are very critical of the Maastricht treaty, the stability pact and the Single European Act. I do not think that that has changed appreciably over the past few years.

I want to put two questions to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary. She will know of the McDougall report, which said that, in the creation of a single currency and a European central bank, it would be necessary to create large structural funds that would have to be moved around Europe. At the bare minimum, that means increasing the standard rate of income tax by 5p in the pound. We are talking about a huge amount of money. Where will it come from?

My second question is this. We are already seeing the cranking up of the propaganda machine in favour of a single currency. We are seeing 32-ft trailers going around the country, visiting schools and communities, packed with pro-European monetary union material that is being distributed to schoolchildren. I find that rather worrying; it smacks of 1984.

The people who are paying for that propaganda are us, and those whom we represent. The taxpayers' money is going to Brussels, and is then being pumped back into the propaganda machine that pays for those trailers to trail around the country. It will pay for all sorts of other things in the run-up to the referendum, whenever that happens—presumably involving advertising, posters, leaflets and so forth. May we have a guarantee that taxpayers' money will also be used to provide information—propaganda—opposing a single currency?

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in 1986, an Education Act was passed, one of whose provisions was that politically controversial subjects, if taught in schools, must be taught in an impartial and balanced way? If his picture of the one-sided propaganda is correct—as I think it is—what is happening is not only undemocratic and immoral, but illegal.

Mr. Cryer: I am not sure it is, because this activity is not taking place in schools. I may be wrong, but I do not think that that is happening. It is happening outside schools, largely in communities. My real point is whether taxpayers' money will be used to provide the opposite case and to argue against the single currency, the Maastricht treaty and everything that goes along with them.

[Mr. Cryer]

I was elected to this place to represent 60,000 people in Hornchurch and Rainham. I exercise my vote in this place on their behalf. They obviously have a right to a say in any dilution of that vote. I was elected to defend living standards, jobs and public services such as the national health service. I see the Maastricht treaty and the stability pact and everything that goes with them as a direct threat to the reasons for my election.

It occurs to me that, during the election campaign, the single currency was raised, I would think, by one in three or one in four of those I approached on the doorstep. I never came across anyone who supported the single currency. No other issue was raised as much on the doorstep.

Mr. Rammell: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about accountability and control. However, if he is opposed to the Maastricht treaty and the single currency as he argues, what alternative mechanism would he suggest for dealing with international currency speculation?

Mr. Cryer: Probably we saw it 50 years ago with Bretton Woods, which provided quite an effective method for quite a long time, or a few decades.

I remind my hon. Friend that we were told that the exchange rate mechanism was necessary, and that we had to be part of it. It was do or die—we had to join, or outside we would perish. We ended up spending £10 billion in one day. We crashed out, and from Black Wednesday we ended up devaluing and dropping interest rates. That led to a recovery in manufacturing—fairly modest, but it was recovery. If we were inside the single currency, we could not do that, because we would not have the sovereign power to devalue and to change interest rates. We would also lose power over the other economic levers.

9.11 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): It is a pleasure, and rather surprising these days, to follow a Labour party Euro-sceptic. I think that every faction in the House would agree that we are discussing probably the most important political and economic decision of the past few years, as the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) said.

If members of the public read the report of the debate they will find that the greatest confusion exists among all factions about precisely how the decision should best be taken. That gave rise to the most animated debate between the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and the Chief Secretary about the timing of the referendum.

I shall confine myself to the official Front-Bench positions and leave out the positions of the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and me as Back-Bench dissidents. The Liberal position appears to be that there should be a referendum now and that we should join the single currency almost straight away regardless, in the optimistic hope that economic conditions will prove right. The Government's position is, "Let us wait until we have decided that the economic conditions are right and then have the referendum on the whole issue." My party's official position is that these economic problems will be terribly difficult to determine one way or the other for at least the next two Parliaments, and that at some time after that we should move to a referendum, when the political and economic issues can be discussed.

All this is confusing. I have to say, as an opponent of the Liberal Democrats, that I find myself nearer to their position, but I am not very satisfied with the economic part of it. We must ask ourselves what the referendum is meant to be for. Everyone in the House is agreed that the House will not determine the issue. We have handed over its determination to a referendum.

The time was when the respect in which I agreed with my right hon. Friends the Members for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) and for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and our erstwhile colleague Mr. Michael Portillo on this subject was that I was against deciding the issue by means of a referendum. We agreed to have a referendum in the interests of party unity. The agreement did not quite achieve that, but there was a better argument. The argument was that the referendum would determine the constitutional issue. It is the constitutional issue which divides the House across party lines; which divides the Conservative party; and which divides the Labour party, as we have just heard.

There are those who believe that there is a constitutional bar, and that regardless of whether the single currency succeeds, there are political objections to joining. For that reason, I believe that we should hold the referendum comparatively early: the value of that is that it will enable us to move on to a debate. Until we resolve that issue by the route that we choose, there will be tremendous political and economic uncertainty surrounding the United Kingdom's relationships with the European Union. The political uncertainty is bad for this country's interests, and the economic uncertainty is extremely bad for our economic prospects.

Personally, I do not think that there is a constitutional bar. I do not believe that going into the European central bank and pooling monetary policy would automatically lead to handing over tax or handing over control of public spending. I would support a continued veto of that. I do not believe that it would lead to the kind of political union that my Euro-sceptic right hon. and hon. Friends believe would follow. Political union has always been one of the aims of the European Union, but not the centralised state that they think will inevitably follow.

I would hold a referendum early. Thereafter, it is for the House to decide when the economic conditions are right, and for the Government to face up to the fact that they must start constructing their policy to produce conditions in which that economic issue can be resolved. My own view is that we cannot join at present. The conditions are wrong, and it would be wrong to take our interest rates down to European levels now.

It will soon become apparent whether the single currency will succeed. If it succeeds, it will, in my opinion, soon be clear that the balance between the risks of going in and the risks of staying outside is heavily in favour of going in. The decision will never be clear cut. It will never be obvious when we should join. There will always be a judgment to be made.

In the next year or two, it will be perfectly obvious whether we are gaining economic benefits or advantages from staying out. Of course, I understand why people are worried about the risks of going in. The risks of staying out too long are seriously understated. We all talk about

the single currency succeeding, but no one ever defines what we mean by that. Success means low inflation, fiscal stability and the attraction of inward investment. If we have a volatile exchange rate, the risks of staying outside are that it will drive away inward investment. We will also discover that we have lost a great deal of influence on economic policy making on the continent.

I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you did not believe that I could complete a speech in five minutes. I scarcely believed it myself, but I have almost made it.

My final point is that it is all very well to attack my party for choosing a timetable that is plainly not pragmatic—it is plainly based on putting the decision to the Greek calends and hoping that it will go away—but the Government are equally guilty. The courageous words out in the Rocky mountains are just a repetition of a position that is not strong enough. The reason for waiting until the next election is all a calculation of media influence, the likelihood of winning and other factors. If the Government are serious in their intention, they should start pitching policy and preparing now, so that, if the public can be satisfied that the political implications are in this country's interests, the economic conditions are more likely to be achieved

9.17 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): In the time available to me, I shall make three brief points. I support the Government amendment and profoundly disagree with the motion tabled by the Liberal Democrats. I thought that the Government's stated policy conveyed through the Chancellor's statement a few months ago was that we are in favour of the principle. Therefore, an early referendum, without some hard facts to put before the British people, would be a cynical and wasted exercise.

People have been talking about sovereignty for many years. The subject makes for an interesting debate, but when one asks people what they mean by sovereignty, they start to scratch their heads. Suppose we remind them of the day that sterling crashed out of the exchange rate mechanism, and start to construct an argument about sovereignty around that issue: it is as if the previous Government, exercising their sovereignty, planned that we would crash out of the ERM, and planned interest rates of 15 per cent. The argument about sovereignty is hollow in the modern world in which we live, with global economies and financial movements across the world at the flick of an eye. I agree with some of the comments made by Opposition Members about sovereignty, but we must be careful about those arguments.

There seems to be an assumption—it is inherent in the Liberal Democrat motion—that the single currency will be a roaring success. I am prepared to wait and see whether it is, which is why I support the Government's position. However, it is by no means certain that it will be the success that some would have us believe. I hope that it will be, because the agenda has moved on from the days when we talked about a referendum in 1975 and nobody mentioned a single currency. Even when the Single European Act was passed in 1985, a single currency was not mentioned. It was not until the late 1980s that people began to discuss a single currency, so the debate has moved on. I believe that the single currency will happen, but I am not convinced that it will be a success, which is why the Government's policy is right.

The Government have said that there is no question of putting taxation on the agenda, and I support that position. Although we will have to wait and see whether the single currency is successful, there will undoubtedly be pressures to put taxation on the agenda within the single currency area, however large it is, and those pressures will be felt soon after the single currency is established. Although taxation is not on the present Government's agenda—to be fair, it was not on the previous Government's agenda either—we all know that some in the European Union want it on the agenda. The European Union is not an event; it is an evolving process. We have already had six VAT directives; our indirect taxation is heavily influenced and controlled by the EU.

The argument that we cannot have a single currency unless we have some form of direct federal taxation can be backed up. The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) shakes his head, but we would be foolish not to recognise that the argument exists. That is why this Government and the previous Government were right to say that they would oppose any movement in that direction.

My final point concerns fiscal transfers and the pressures that will begin to build up in the single currency area in Europe. The labour flexibility in Europe which the Government support will not happen overnight, so there will be pressures on employment, resulting in pockets of high unemployment in the single currency area. I believe that the Maastricht criteria and the stability pact make that inevitable. If Europe is to deal with that, considerable fiscal transfers are required. Are we prepared to contemplate that and to allow the European Union budget to increase significantly to allow it to happen? I do not have the answer to those questions. If I had, I would probably write a book. However, I am convinced that those pressures will exist.

We must have a clear debate on all the issues surrounding the single currency and ensure that we go to the British people on a recommendation that is in Britain's economic interests. Many areas need to be clarified with greater certainty before we take that enormous and historic step.

9.24 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and, in the spirit of your observations, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be brief.

This issue is vital to my constituents and to the many businesses across the Borders and in Penicuik. Hon. Members have eloquently put the case for membership of the single currency—I shall not repeat all the arguments—and passionate views on both sides of the argument have been expressed. I believe that most people recognise that there is a need to resolve the issue one way or the other. With the arguments being expressed properly and being debated not only in the Chamber but much more widely, we are confident that the argument can be won and that, in a referendum, we would get the ringing endorsement for the single currency that this country undoubtedly requires.

The issue was mentioned regularly on the doorsteps during the election campaign, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) said. I, like him, found that a lot of people were hostile to the concept of a single currency, but, time and again as I debated on the doorsteps and at

[Mr. Michael Moore]

specially arranged meetings, I found people beginning to understand the different levels of the argument. Many people were persuadable that the single currency is not the bad idea that it is portrayed to be in many nationalist arguments. I use that word in the narrow nationalist English sense, rather than in the Scottish sense, so that the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) does not get too upset.

The debate has moved on since the election, but those discussions highlighted the fact that people need the chance for reasoned debate. The problem is that, for all the Government's words and assertions, the uncertainty that is created by their position is proving highly damaging—people do not know which way we will go, which is bad news for those in my constituency who depend heavily on exporting industries. Many of them are concerned because they have no idea where the Government are going. That is fundamental: 60 per cent. of Scotland's manufacturing exports go to European Union countries, and that pattern is repeated in my constituency where Curtis Fine Papers exports all sorts of paper, Ballantyne's Cashmere exports the highest-quality cashmere goods and Viasystems is involved in the printed circuit board market. Almost all their exports go into the EU.

For those companies, there is a strong pragmatic argument on the single currency—economic and monetary union will happen. The single currency is happening in the rest of Europe, and the United Kingdom is being left behind. Yet again, we seem to be determined to miss another vital European development—perhaps the most vital this century. Scottish companies will have to account for the single currency, regardless of whether the United Kingdom is part of it, and the benefits of being in the single currency will mostly pass them by.

Those points were reinforced this week during the Scottish Affairs Committee's visit to the Borders as part of its inquiries into inward investment and tourism. The visit highlighted beyond doubt the difficulties for areas such as the Borders in attracting and keeping businesses—infrastructure is poor, there is no assisted area status and people think that there is not a level playing field.

Crucially, one of the liveliest debates at a breakfast meeting between members of the Committee and representatives of local business, economic development officials, trade unionists and others was about the single currency. It was generally agreed that the postponement of a decision on the euro was costly to them as individual businesses, was highly risky for their future, and was damaging for their workers and employees. The highly pragmatic view was expressed around the table that it was neither in the interest of the Borders nor in the national interest to be left behind.

The rest of Europe has made its decision, but, yet again, Britain is in a quandary on a major issue. The waiting and uncertainty are creating huge problems for businesses in my constituency and across the country. We should widen the debate and move it beyond the House and the boardrooms to engage people across the United Kingdom. We have nothing to fear from that. Many people already realise that we must not be left behind, and it is time that the Government realised that, too.

9.30 pm

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): I approach this subject without any emotional hang-ups. I do not address it principally from the constitutional aspect: an approach which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) attributed to many of those who contribute a note of dissent to the thrust of what the Government are trying to do. I speak on behalf of humble and thrifty capitalists—of whom I am one—who, be they charities, pension funds, unit trusts, or small businesses with money on deposit, search for a store of value.

We are told that there will be uniform interest rates across the region. Plainly, that has to happen, because if there were not uniform interest rates, people could borrow in one financial centre and lend at a higher rate in another. Does the House really think that it is feasible to borrow from the Dresdner bank in Frankfurt and also from the banca di mafiosi benevolenti in Palermo at the same rate, use the money for the same purposes and move it around the whole of the region? There must be some flaw. When we view this in practical terms, we realise straight away that something is not quite right.

Huge drawings may be made on the banca di mafiosi benevolenti in Palermo, which are then distributed in the most profligate manner by the local authority and by others benefiting from the situation in Sicily. If that completely throws out of kilter all the convergence criteria to which the Italian Government professed themselves to be committed at the time when they entered the single currency, penalties will be visited on Italy. It will be fined. Fined? What if it does not pay?

We have seen that happen many times with arrangements for fining and punishing non-compliance with the economic and single market provisions of the European Union. I saw it happen when I was Minister for Trade. The French were fined for subsidising their carpet manufacturers. When did they pay? They ran it for two, three, five, seven years, and they never really paid. If countries do not pay, what happens? Are any sanctions imposed on members who do not pay their fines? If they pay the fines, or even part of them, where do they go? The closer one looks at this proposal, the more ludicrous it becomes. It is one of the many aspects of an idealised concept which will clearly not work.

If we pursue this matter a little more closely, we will see that all the ingredients are present for rapidly developing chaos in the single currency area. Very quickly, it will be open season for those very currency speculators against whom the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) told us we would be defended. The hon. Gentleman said that, once we had a single currency, the currency speculators would not be able to operate and we would be safe from them. He completely overlooked the experience of the ERM. We were told to go into the ERM to protect sterling from the currency speculators, and what happened? The currency speculators moved in very quickly and drove us out. Immediately, we had to resort—briefly and temporarily—to putting up interest rates to defend the currency, and then we got out. Everything settled down and we proceeded in smooth waters.

I tell the House absolutely candidly that the basic ingredients of a soft currency are present in all the factors that will come together in the single currency. The Liberal Democrats are keen to lower the value of the pound.

If they want a soft currency, this is the way to get it. The trouble with a soft currency is that it is susceptible to predatory risk.

The first thing that will happen when the euro runs into a bad patch is that it will be attacked by currency speculators all around the globe, and a crisis will develop—an ERM crisis to the cube root. What happens when the intrinsic value of the euro is seen to fall in relation to the dollar and the yen by, say, the Germans? The Germans have contributed the hardest and strongest element in the single currency portfolio.

The Italians do not mind—they are delighted to be signed up to something that will greatly increase the strength of their savings and the value of their currency. They see it as magnificent. However, the Germans will ask, "What is going on? We entered with our currency at a certain rate to the yen and the dollar, and we could buy that number of yen and dollars. We cannot any longer, and we want to get out."

The same thing will happen, if we go in, to the Chancellor of Exchequer—whom I am delighted and honoured to see in his place—who will find that sterling will be under greater pressure and will suffer from more acute difficulties than when it stood alone under his careful and prudent chancellorship. The euro will be in a mess. Why? Because it has been diluted by drachmas, pesetas, escudos and lira, and because it—together with the deutschmark—is being used to fund corrupt and profligate public expenditure projects right across the region.

The euro will be weakened. It will be subject to raids, and all the currency speculators and futures buyers across the globe will concentrate on it and will bring it down. If we are part of it, we can at least be grateful that with it will go the whole pretentious and fraudulent structure of European federalism.

9.37 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I begin by thanking all hon. Members who have contributed to a debate which, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) both stressed, concerns the most important strategic economic issue with which we must deal.

The speech of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) was also important. He recognised that, since most of us came to this House a year ago, the situation has radically changed. We are no longer dealing with an academic debate about monetary union in Europe. Just over a year ago, one could have reasonably believed that monetary union might not happen; that it might be seriously delayed; that it might fail on take-off; or, at the very least, that it would start with a limited number of members. We are now dealing with an imminent reality of a project that is taking off on time, with most members of the European Union. The markets clearly believe, from the trends and spreads in the bond market, that it has achieved a high degree of convergence.

British businesses will have to deal with monetary union as a matter of practical reality within a short period of time. Whether companies like it or not, they will be invoiced in euros. Government policy increasingly will be set in new institutions such as the euro 11. In other words, we are dealing with a rapidly moving situation. It is in that context that we need to judge the rather leisurely time horizons that the Government have set for their own policy.

Let me start by referring to the Conservative contributions. It would be easy to mock the diversity of views, but I shall not do that because Conservative Members have treated the House seriously and have honestly set out their different views. That does them credit. Rather less creditable was the performance of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen. It is difficult to define precisely their current position. They have alighted on a 10-year transition period, but it is far from clear where that figure comes from. If we take the view that some people want to join now and some never want to join, 10 is a rough average between zero and infinity. It is an extremely obscure process of deduction.

Another question that was left open by the Opposition is what they think the British exchange rate policy should be in the next decade. It would be interesting to hear that clarified. Do they envisage 10 years of a floating rate for sterling or do they forecast a period of pegging of the exchange rate or of a move from one to the other towards the end of the 10-year period? Those are important questions in terms of economic management and business, and they should be clarified.

The Chief Secretary acknowledged a substantial area of common ground with my colleagues. That was a reasonable assumption. He sketched out some of the differences in his approach and gave what, on first sight, seems to be a sensible view. He said that we should set a series of economic tests, see how they work out over a period and make a judgment. He forgot to mention that there has already been a series of economic tests. They were called the Maastricht criteria and they were considered adequate for the other members of the European Union.

The Government have their own improvised set of tests. What does that mean for British business, for what the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) called the humble and thrifty entrepreneurs who will have to compete within the common monetary union? At the moment, they are getting some general encouragement. Glossy pamphlets encourage them to prepare for monetary union, but what should those entrepreneurs do? Should they commit shareholders' resources to getting ready? If I were in business, because of the enormous uncertainty, I should be cautious about committing any of my shareholders' money to preparations.

Some of the uncertainty is inherent, but some has been generated by the way in which the Government have approached the issue. Let us consider the five tests. My hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) described the uncertainty in some of his companies. How do we know when the five tests have been passed? Unlike the Maastricht criteria, they are not quantified. If we pass three or four of the five do we wait another two years to see the outcome? We are almost certain that one of the tests, that on unemployment, will fail because unemployment will probably rise. How does a business man judge whether the economic qualifications have been realised?

There is also the uncertainty of the next general election. I am sure that the Government are confident, but politics is a strange business and none of us can

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

realistically predict the outcome of that election. Beyond that, there will be a referendum. We have argued for a referendum, but the democratic process could produce any outcome, and that is an additional uncertainty.

Last but not least is the rarely mentioned uncertainty of how the rest of the European Union will react to our late application for admission. There is a rather arrogant assumption about that and, in his otherwise estimable contribution, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) captured some of it by assuming that the rest of the EU would be delighted to accept British membership in five years' time on any conditions that we choose to set. That may be excessively sanguine. The other EU member states may point to the awkward loose end of two years of exchange rate stability and say that we must demonstrate that. Will the two years be tacked on to the five years?

I repeat that there is enormous uncertainty and that some of it has been created by the way in which the Government have approached the question. I share the Government's technical dilemma over the problem of convergence. Although it is real, it is easily overstated. The fact is that large parts of the British economy are not convergent. The interest rate that should apply for Scottish manufacturing is not the same interest rate that should apply for services in south-east England, but we live with a common rate.

We have an environment within Europe where a degree of convergence is happening now; we can see the indicators. The European Union in the core countries—Germany and France—is accelerating. Interest rates will have to rise. The British economy is patently slowing down and interest rates will have to fall over this Parliament.

Convergence of interest rates matters above all if we regard monetary policy as the sole determinant of how economies should be managed. One of our central criticisms of the Government is that they have not been willing to use taxation—up or down—as a way of managing economic demand. If we accept that there is a role for taxation in economic management, monetary convergence is much less important.

We can argue about those economic technical issues, but the fundamental disagreement between us and the Government has nothing to do with economic tests or economic convergence. It is about political judgment. We believe that we could win a referendum, even if it were held now and even given public opinion. The Government's priorities are elsewhere. That was eloquently revealed when the Chancellor chose a few days ago to pitch his strongest and perhaps most courageous political appeal to a bonding session of News International executives. Clearly, that is the Government's political problem.

Perhaps I may conclude, and give the Government an opportunity to reply at some length, by reiterating the key points that my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), have made on the way in which we think that the Government should proceed. We believe, and this view is shared by many Euro-sceptics, that there should be a referendum not just on the evaluation of where we are economically, but on the fundamental principles—whether one is a Euro-sceptic or a supporter of EMU, there are fundamental principles of sovereignty and long-term political commitment. We believe that that should be tested out in a referendum. That should be held to establish the framework within which economic judgments are then made. I think that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) also saw that sequence as the logical one.

Therefore, we support an early referendum. We believe that the Government would add credibility to their commitment to monetary policy if they had a clear declaration of intent. They make supportive noises—we recognise that—but a clear declaration of intent would be more valuable.

We believe that the Government should give a much clearer lead in some of what we call the docking manoeuvres: some of the preparatory measures that the Government will have to make. The Government tell business to get ready for monetary union, but they have much preparation to do themselves. The adjustment process for the Bank of England will be difficult. Switching to fixed interest rates for the housing market will not be easy to achieve. Achieving a fixed exchange rate from where we are now will not be easy. The docking manoeuvres—the transition—need to be properly explained and set out, as we have tried to do constructively from these Benches.

9.47 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): We have had a very interesting and mature debate—suffice it to say that it has been so mature that the bovver boys have disappeared. *[Interruption.]* I do not honestly class the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) as a bovver boy. We can discuss that later.

I commend the Liberal Democrats for having this debate because it has exposed some interesting issues. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) exposed the difference between us. I accept that there is much that unites us on this issue, but he argues for a referendum on the principle, while acknowledging that many of the pre-conditions are not yet right, whereas we say that we must get the pre-conditions right in terms of economic convergence and then put the economic case for the single currency to the British people.

That is a substantive difference. It comes back to the issue of preparation. When we went into the Treasury on 2 May last year, the one thing that was glaringly obvious was that the single currency was the subject that dare not speak its name. The previous Government had been so riven by divisions on it that the necessary and practical preparations for a significant and major change—not necessarily for us, but for our European partners, which would therefore impact on us—had not even been thought about.

During tonight's debate, that schism has become more and more apparent. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), in a brief but succinct speech, showed a significant change in his position. When he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, his position was that we should keep our options open. Tonight, he argued for an early referendum.

Many hon. Members believe that the stance of the Conservative party is no single currency for at least 10 years. However, in response to a question from my

right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary, the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), said that he could not see a time when Britain would join a single currency. That is a significant change on which commentators and we will reflect for some time.

Tonight, the debate has concentrated on an issue that should have been concentrated on by the previous Government. The last time we debated it was on 31 April, on the eve of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and me going to Brussels for that significant weekend—*[Laughter.]* I am afraid that the juvenile tendency has crept back in again. On that weekend, 11 countries decided to join the single currency. Eleven countries are to join the euro zone. The European central bank is now up and running—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that hon. Members seem to be having difficulty following this quite substantive issue.

This morning, I visited the Royal Mint at Llantrisant, which is preparing euro coins for France, Germany and Finland. With five months to go to the beginning of the single currency, other countries are preparing, while Britain is having to run fast to catch up because the previous Government could not bear to address the issues involved in preparing for a single currency. There are major issues. They are not just about information technology and changing accountancy; they are strategic issues for British business to ensure our competitiveness. That point was missed by the shadow Chancellor when he spoke. Significant strategic decisions must be taken.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) said that if we made the decision to join the single currency, that would alter the position of sterling. He has fallen into the trap that the previous Government fell into—seeking short-term solutions rather than long-term solutions for long-term gain. One of the key elements in our decision on a single currency—and, indeed, in our relationship with our partners on the issue of a single currency—must be that we have established economic stability in our country and also created the necessary convergence and flexibility to withstand external shocks. That is exactly what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been trying to do.

The hon. Gentleman said that he would be more convinced of our position if it were clear that we had put in place a programme that fulfilled the five tests to which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor referred in his statement on 27 October. In fact, we have begun that process because it is sound economics. The hon. Gentleman, in a courageous speech, made the point that stability in growth is good housekeeping. It is, and it is also good and sensible economics.

The Government are achieving macro-economic stability by our sound fiscal and monetary policies. We are creating the right framework for low inflation by our reforms of the Bank of England and our commitment to monitoring the inflation target in the light of the European central bank's practices. We are ensuring that our fiscal rules and deficit reduction plan continue to be consistent with the terms of the stability and growth pact, thereby underlining our commitment to avoid an excessive deficit. We are promoting greater flexibility in the United Kingdom economy by our welfare to work programme and our investment in long-term skills. In essence, we are attempting to prepare, so that the British people are able to decide on the matter based on the Chancellor's sensible economic tests.

The hon. Member for Gordon asked—it is in his motion—why the Government do not publish

"six monthly reports by the Treasury and the Bank of England".

We have no plans to publish such reports on interest rate convergence. As we said, it could take a period of time—which cannot be finite—to demonstrate sustainable convergence. As the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) well knows, economics is not an exact science. We shall have to establish a period of stability. The important issue, which the Government are addressing, is one of ensuring that that stability is delivered.

Many of the points raised by hon. Members in this debate were essentially about our economy's ability to operate successfully within a single currency. There will be significant issues in dealing with the changeover to a single currency, should we decide that it is in Britain's best economic interests to join it. As the issues are so significant, the Chancellor has already established a standing committee to examine the critical preparations for 1 January 1999. It is in the interests of every single hon. Member to stress to businesses in their constituency how important it is to make those preparations for 1 January 1999.

The Government are also addressing the larger issue—about the preparedness of British industry to become part of a single currency. Before the end of this year, the Government intend to publish a draft national changeover plan. We shall have to address the issues. The British Bankers Association has already pointed out to us the critical issues that the banking community will have to consider in preparing for the single currency. Although the financial sector is better prepared than any of the other sectors of our economy for the changeover, the other sectors must address the critical issues that will have to be considered in preparing for the transition.

The people of the United Kingdom have still to engage in the debate on the single currency—which is another argument against precipitately holding a referendum. So far, the debate has been one of yah-boo—primarily among the Euro-sceptics of the Conservative party, although I accept that there are Euro-sceptics also in the Labour ranks—rather than about the substantive issues.

How will people feel when they go to the costas in Spain and the German in the next sunbed is paying for his beer in euros, has not had to pay any commission to a travel agent before his holiday and will not have to pay whenever he comes—*[Interruption.]* Those are the issues that ordinary people will address. When they return to the United Kingdom from their holiday and can use euros over the counter in Marks and Spencer, they will turn round to us as politicians and ask, "What preparations have you been making?" That is when the Government will be seen to have been making the necessary preparations.

I tell the hon. Member for Gordon that I accept the Liberal Democrats' anxiety to be part of a single currency. For the first time ever, we have a British Government who are not opposed to the single currency in principle. The key issue must be whether it is in our long-term interests as an economy. That is what we are seeking to judge.

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

Our central Government objective of seeking to achieve high and stable levels of growth and employment underlines the extent to which Britain's interest must be taken into account before we make the decision. Yes, there will be a debate in this country. I hope that it will be a reasoned one and not descend into the myopia that we have witnessed on occasions among those on the Opposition Benches.

We have had an interesting debate. I commend to the House the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 46, Noes 292.

Division No. 342] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Swinney, John
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Edward Davey and Mr. Phil Willis.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*

Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Jane Kennedy and
Mr. Jon Owen Jones.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's conviction to pursue a prudent and balanced policy in respect of United Kingdom membership of the single currency; believes that, in principle, British membership of a successful single currency could bring economic benefits to Britain and to Europe; welcomes the Government's decision to make the national economic interest the key test for British entry; agrees with the Government that, barring some fundamental and unforeseen change in economic circumstances, making a decision to join during the current Parliament is not realistic; commends the actions of the Government to introduce a programme of economic reforms and practical assistance for British businesses which are both in the national economic interest and will help to create a real option of joining the single currency early in the next Parliament should Government, Parliament and the people so decide; and believes that the Government's policy will bring stability to business and reflects the long-term economic interests of the country.

SECTION 5 OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (AMENDMENT) ACT 1993

Ordered,

That, for the purposes of their approval under section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998 and the Comprehensive Spending Review shall be treated as if they were instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

PETITIONS

Transport (Hastings and Rye)

10.13 pm

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): I am enthusiastic in presenting this petition on behalf of the thousands of my constituents who have added their names to it. It is timely because of the Government's imminent decision on the roads review. It states:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of the Residents of Hastings and Rye

Declares that for far too long our local communities have suffered economically and environmentally due to the lack of adequate Transport Infrastructure. We are faced with diminishing opportunities for inward investment and job creation due to poor access and shortage of commercial and industrial premises resulting in continuing high unemployment and deprivation.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons do call upon the Government to listen to our local Member of Parliament and take the following actions without further delay.

(1) Approve the impending Improvements to the A21 Trunk Road.

(2) Approve the pending Improvements to the A259 Trunk Road including the Bexhill Bypass and the Hastings Eastern and Western Bypasses.

(3) Enter into discussions with the relevant owners and operators with the intent of achieving a major improvement in the rail service in particular with regard to the Hastings to Ashford link.

The petition has my whole-hearted support and relates to probably the most important issue facing my constituency.

To lie upon the Table.

Easter Floods

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I wish to present a petition on behalf of 2,500 residents of the Far Cotton and St. James areas of Northampton who were affected by the Easter floods earlier this year. The petition states:

The Humble Petition of Residents, Business Owners and Tenants and other Citizens of the Far Cotton and St. James areas of Northampton.

Sheweth

That we, the undersigned, hereby:

1. express our deep concern that our homes and premises were flooded or otherwise affected by water, noxious substances and the like in the 1998 Easter Flood Disaster which struck part of Northampton;

2. are dismayed by the resultant extensive loss, damage and devaluation of property and premises and loss of income that we have suffered;

3. are distressed by the loss of life occasioned.

4. question the efficacy of the Inquiries so far established due to their lack of real independence or inadequate terms of reference of insufficient authority;

5. call upon Her Majesty's Government to establish a truly Independent Public Inquiry under the stewardship of a Judge of the High Court (or other suitably qualified person) having the authority to gather evidence, order the attendance of witnesses and the examination and inspection of all the relevant material with the objective of drawing conclusions and detailing recommendations as to compensation, future protective and preventative measures, apportion blame or establish fault where appropriate (including that for negligence or criminal negligence causing death) and other matters, within a Report to be published and presented to the appropriate authorities and the Minister responsible for action.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your honourable House do support such a Comprehensive Public Inquiry as the mechanism for revealing and exposing the full facts of the aforementioned Flood Disaster

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

To lie upon the Table.

Lockerbie

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.17 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): This debate takes place in circumstances that are entirely different from those of the previous 14 Adjournment debates on Lockerbie. Rosemary Wolf, the representative of the American relatives, is reported on Ceefax this evening as saying that Britain and the United States may allow two Libyan suspects to be tried in Holland. She said that she had been told by Madeleine Albright in a meeting that a trial under Scottish law but not on Scottish soil was being explored. This Adjournment debate is really a plea of encouragement for such a course of action.

We believe that there is no realistic hope of the Libyan suspects coming to either Scotland or the United States.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): My hon. Friend will be aware that my constituent Julia Cadman, whose brother died at Lockerbie, has approached me on several occasions and asked me to express her concern at the delay in the trial and offered her views on how that should proceed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the overriding issue is one of flexibility in how the trial should proceed? That trial should go ahead and there should be fair jurisdiction when it does.

Mr. Dalyell: Flexibility is extremely important, but the Libyans have given clear assurances that they would come. Of course, it is fair to point out that the court would operate under all normal provisions of Scots criminal law, except that it would be in a neutral country venue; that there would be no jury; that the jury should be replaced by an international panel of judges led by a Scot; and that the Scot leading the panel should be appointed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be extremely useful if we were advised of what discussions, if any, have taken place between Foreign Office and Scottish Office officials, and, indeed, the Lord Advocate, in respect of the third country option, and whether those discussions were under way on 6 July, when the Scottish Grand Committee met in Edinburgh?

Mr. Dalyell: I would have to think carefully about that proposition.

The Libyans did agree that the UN Secretary-General should be asked to decide on the other, probably four, judges. I believe that they should be given a chance, and that the bottom line is a trial in Holland or no trial at all. That is the reality.

10.20 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): I am more than grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) for his kindness in allowing me five minutes to speak in a campaign on which he and I have engaged for many years.

Everyone would agree that there is a desperate need to ensure that we have a trial and thus clarify the facts of the appalling events that took place at Lockerbie.

That is one thing on which everyone can agree. Sadly, over the years, the prospects of a trial taking place have faded away, first, because the Libyans, rightly or wrongly, have been unwilling to send people for a trial in which they believed the jury would have been previously influenced; and, secondly, because the United Kingdom and the United States have been unwilling to make any provision to change that. However, the Libyans have now said that they would co-operate in sending the two accused persons to a third country. Now, because their rights and their faith have been challenged, they have said that, if need be, they would hand them over to a third country—Egypt.

As we understand it, the UK and the US have obviously changed their view. There are many possible reasons for that: first, there was the European Court decision which suggested that they should decide where the trial should take place; secondly, there is the fact that many countries have been breaking the sanctions, and more have said that they will break them in September unless there is a change in policy; and, thirdly, there is the fact that the Scottish Parliament might take a special interest in the issue and table legislation that would bring it into conflict with the British Government. Whatever the reason for the Government's decision, it is a tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow—I say hon. Friend even though we sit on opposite sides of the House—that there has been what we can all agree is good news.

I want to make one simple point. Having observed all that has happened, year after year, I hope that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), who is a man of integrity, will use all his power to ensure that these developments will not be a trap. We must not have a situation whereby the United States can say, "We have offered the Libyans a trial in the Hague with an independent jury, but they have turned it down. We always knew that they were rascals, twisters, vagabonds and rogues." I am afraid that there are those in the American State Department who might engage in that activity, even though I am sure that, like civil servants everywhere, most American civil servants are nice, kindly people.

I appeal to the Government to use all their power to make sure that discussions proceed with good will and integrity. The obvious step now, if the Government can confirm the various reports that we have heard, would be for officials of both Governments to enter into private discussions, to sort everything out and to ensure that real progress can be made. On the basis of what the Libyans have said, that should take only a short time; if it took five years, we would know that the assurances that they have given are bogus and could not be trusted. Personally, I believe that, for their own good reasons, Britain, the United States and Libya are now anxious to resolve matters. My hope is that the Minister of State will make it clear that it would be the intention of the UK and US Governments to enter into discussion and consultation on the basis of good will and integrity, with the intention of producing a solution. What we want to know is who carried out this dreadful deed, and we want to make sure that the guilty parties are held responsible.

There is one more point that we should all bear in mind. We should consider our responsibility towards the relations of those who lost their lives in this terrible tragedy. We surely have a duty—much more important than party politics—to ensure that those whose relations lost their lives in an appalling tragedy will find out the facts, and the truth. I hope that the Government will say that they will use all their powers to endeavour to resolve the issue in private discussions and to ensure, first, that a trial takes place and, secondly, that the truth is told.

10.25 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): First, let me tell my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that there is no doubt that his tenacity and diligence are well recognised through his pursuing of an issue that is important not only to him, but to a much wider audience.

My hon. Friend and others who are present—my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) and the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor)—are merely some among those who have rightly championed the cause of the Lockerbie families. Moreover, it is a matter of fact that those families have been regular attenders when my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow has raised the issue in Adjournment debates, and on other occasions.

The terrorist crime that we are discussing produced two sets of victims. Obviously, there were the 270 innocent men, women and children who lost their lives on that terrible night in December 1988, but there were also the relatives and friends who have had to endure grief and uncertainty for nearly 10 years, not knowing beyond all doubt who inflicted the pain of their sad loss. My hon. Friend the Member for Halton raised the issue on behalf of his constituents, but, having spoken to members of the families involved, I know that, even after all these years, the process of grief may in this case have been made not better but worse by the passage of time.

I can only begin to imagine the sense of loss and—obviously—the thirst for justice that motivate the Lockerbie families and their friends after 10 years of the search for truth. I assure the House that the Government share their objective. Resolving the tragic crime of Lockerbie has been a priority for the Government since 1 May 1997. This was a crime involving the mass murder of 270 people, and it cannot and will not be allowed to fade away simply because of the passage of time. The Government have devoted considerable time and energy to the search for a just solution, and we will continue to do so. That commitment—along with our commitment to fight terrorism from wherever it may come—is unshakeable. I think that the House and the country would want that to be well established.

Soon after the Government were formed, my noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate reviewed all the evidence at his disposal, and reached the same conclusion as his predecessors in that office. Specifically, he reached the conclusion that the evidence justified the proceedings against the two Libyans accused. That was a decision of the Lord Advocate alone, and was made on the basis of the facts made available to him.

The Lord Advocate is, of course, entirely independent in the pursuit of his prosecutorial functions. I respect the Lord Advocate; I respect his decisions, as I respect

[Mr. Tony Lloyd]

his professional skill, his judgment and his integrity. I do not say that just because it is important to record the fact that my noble and learned Friend has a difficult job to perform; I know from personal contact that he has applied himself to his task with considerable care and diligence. Moreover, from the very beginning he ensured that he went back to first principles in deciding that there was a case to answer—not just on the basis of the outrage that occurred at Lockerbie, but on the basis of the evidence that came before him.

On the basis of the Lord Advocate's decision, it was indeed right to pursue criminal proceedings. It has always been the Government's objective to secure a criminal trial at which justice would be done. We have sought to do that in accordance with the conditions set out in the three relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. It remains our view, supported by the Security Council through its resolutions, that a Scottish or United States court is the place for the criminal trial, to which, as we have previously said, we would gladly invite international observers from any interested body, including the United Nations, the Organisation for African Unity, the Arab League and Libya itself. I repeat that we feel that we have nothing to hide in this process.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I have the permission of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) to intervene in the debate.

May I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I have long argued that such a trial should take place at the High Court in Edinburgh? I remind him of what the then Prime Minister said on 9 January 1996, when I asked him:

"Why does the Prime Minister place so much emphasis on the need to try such persons in either Scotland or America? Why America?"

The then Prime Minister said:

"We are not asking them to. We think that the trial should take place in Scotland. We certainly do not think that it would be desirable—necessarily—for it to take place at The Hague. If, as they have occasionally intimated, the Libyans accept Scottish law and a Scottish judge, I know of no good reason whatsoever why the accused should not appear before a court in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 9 January 1996; Vol. 269, c. 16.]

I said to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), that if such a trial were impossible in Scotland, it should be held at The Hague.

Mr. Lloyd: I have heard my hon. Friend express similar sentiments in previous Adjournment debates. It is a matter of fact that he has been one of the friends—I can say this with no sentimentality attached to it—of the families of Lockerbie in wanting to pursue the matter to a conclusion, both through the House and elsewhere.

I do not speak for the previous Government, but I can certainly speak for the present Government. It has been our intention from the outset, on the basis of the Lord Advocate's view, that criminal proceedings were right and proper, and that those proceedings should take place. We want to see the accused before the courts. It remains our view that a Scottish or a United States court is the place for this criminal trial. Within that context, we would most certainly invite international observers. It would be almost bizarre if those observers did not wish to be present in keeping with the normal traditions of, in this instance, the Scottish judicial system.

There have been—perhaps this touches on my hon. Friend's most recent intervention—criticisms of the fairness of Scottish justice and the alleged partiality of courts in Scotland. I must state very clearly that we reject those criticisms. We do so because they have no foundation and because the Scottish legal system has proved itself against the test of time and against the test of challenge. That is an important safeguard within that legal system.

We reject thee criticisms because we believe that they have no foundation. What I have said is self-evident, and I think that it will have the support of the whole House. I notice that there are in the Chamber many Members representing Scottish constituencies.

Although it is self-evident that the Scottish legal system has no apologies to make, last December two independent legal experts chosen not by the British Government or the Lord Advocate, but by the Secretary-General of the United Nations were invited to Scotland to examine the Scottish legal system for themselves. One was a distinguished Zimbabwean High Court judge and the other a distinguished Dutch judge. They came to Scotland to examine the system, and they concluded not only that the Scottish legal system was fair and independent, but that, contrary to some Libyan claims, the accused would receive a fair trial in Scotland under that judicial system, and that their rights during the pre-trial, trial and post-trial proceedings would be fully protected in accordance with international standards.

That is important. The Lord Advocate and my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland took the view that there was nothing to hide from outside witnesses. Those outside experts gave the seal of validity and approval to the Scottish judicial system. We welcome that as an acknowledgement that a trial under Scottish procedures would confirm with the best standards that apply in any part of the world. I do not expect that there will be disagreement in the House with that assessment.

I said earlier that the United Kingdom upholds the binding UN Security Council resolutions concerning Lockerbie and UTA. That remains the case. Those Security Council resolutions followed other atrocities. The shooting of WPC Fletcher, which is subject to continuing interest and challenge, has always been attributed to Libyan suspects.

Mr. Dalyell: As my hon. Friend may know, I went to Scotland Yard at the invitation of the assistant commissioner, David Veness, for a long, long meeting. I have no doubt that Scotland Yard is doing its best, but when is the inquiry likely to conclude? We were promised that a good deal earlier.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend refers to the inquiry into the shooting of WPC Fletcher. I cannot give him an answer tonight. I know that the inquiry is examining the evidence from independent television sources. It is

important for that to be completed. I do not know the answer to my hon. Friend's query. I undertake to inquire for him whether it is possible to give a date for the conclusion of that inquiry.

The atrocity that took place at Lockerbie was one of a series of atrocities committed as acts of terror, whose provenance was the state policy of the Libyan Government. There was a similar incident involving the UTA aircraft, and there was the bombing of the La Belle disco in Germany in 1986. In both cases, criminal proceedings are still taking place. The disco case is still before the German courts. The French have opted for a trial of suspects in absentia. Such a procedure has no precedent and cannot be replicated under Scottish law.

Because of that pattern, it remains necessary that we uphold as binding the UN Security Council resolutions. I remind the House that, as recently as 2 July this year, the sanctions review process at the United Nations reconfirmed the sanctions package that was imposed against the Libyan Government. That is right and proper, as the review process concluded that the Libyan Government had taken no steps to conform with their obligations under those Security Council resolutions.

We pledged to the families that, when we came into office, we would be willing to explore options in order to bring justice for them and for us all, ensuring that terrorist crimes are subject to the rule of law. Over the past 15 months, we have conscientiously pursued that undertaking to the families by considering how justice could best be secured. Naturally, we shall stay in touch with our partners and allies about such issues, but I underline the fact that no decisions have been taken.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow well knows, some of the families and others have suggested that a trial in a third country under Scottish criminal procedure might offer the best way forward. It is vital that everyone understands the legal, diplomatic and political complexities of such an undertaking. As my hon. Friend knows better than I, those complexities have been rehearsed in debates that he has attended over the years. Suffice it to say that those issues are no less complex today than they were previously. I repeat that our objective is to bring the two accused to a trial that will be regarded internationally as fair and competent.

As has always been the case, the solution to this distressing case lies in the hands of the Libyan Government, who, over the past six years, have chosen to adopt a policy of intransigence and non-compliance with the UN Security Council resolutions. Those resolutions are as binding on Libya as they are on the United Nations family. The issue remains unresolved because Libya refuses to abide by its international obligations. I note hon. Members' comments about the Libyan position, but we have seen no signs whatever of the Libyans wanting to bring the issue to a conclusion. Their track record does not lead us to conclude that they have sought to bring the matter to an end. I have already mentioned their entirely bogus assertion that a trial in Scotland would somehow not be fair, despite their acceptance more than five years ago of assurances given in that regard by the Government of the day, which we have repeated.

More recently, Libya has tried to twist the interim judgment of the International Court of Justice. The court merely decided that it wanted to consider in detail at a full hearing the issues presented to it by Libya. The key point, which Libya seeks to obscure, is that the UN Security Council resolutions still stand. Those resolutions specifically require that, to have the impact of the sanctions regime lifted, Libya must surrender the two suspects for trial in Scotland or the United States. They are extremely clear and well-defined; there is no ambiguity in the obligations to the Libyans under that process.

I am acutely conscious of the fact that a wide range of conspiracy theories has grown up about Lockerbie in the last 10 years. Some have been put to me directly by the victims' families. I say with no hint of criticism that I well understand them. It is not surprising that some bizarre theories—and some less bizarre—circulate, given that the evidence held by the prosecuting authorities must, perforce of circumstances, remain confidential to preserve the fairness of a criminal trial, which remains our aim.

We are rightly proud of the genuinely magnificent and painstaking work done by the Scottish police, led by the Dumfries and Galloway constabulary. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow has paid tribute to the role of the police on more than one occasion.

Mr. Dalyell: After 10 long years, does not work get out of date? After all, key witnesses or key dramatis personae may depart this life in the course of time.

Mr. Lloyd: I have absolute sympathy with my hon. Friend about the passage of time, but I repeat that, since they came to power, the Government have sought to bring the matter to an acceptable conclusion, which would mean making sure that the two suspects appear before the courts. I must emphasise to him that, in the Lord Advocate's view, the evidential base still clearly exists to allow that prosecution to go ahead. The unacceptable passage of time has done nothing to lesson the pain of the families; indeed, it has served only to increase it. Nevertheless, that problem can be resolved only if the Libyan Government ensure that the two suspects appear before an acceptable court—a Scottish court.

We want the evidence to be tested in court at the earliest possible opportunity, and the place to do that is a Scottish or a United States court. The Libyan authorities are well aware that the way is open for them to arrange the surrender of the two accused for a fair trial in Scotland or in the United States, in compliance with United Nations Security Council resolutions.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has written twice to Libyan Ministers, restating our position. The suggestion has been made that the Government refuse to talk with the Libyans to understand their point of view. That simply is not the case; we have had exchanges at Foreign Secretary level with the Libyan equivalent of a Prime Minister and with the Foreign Minister, and there are regular exchanges with the Libyan authorities in Tripoli through the British interests section.

I invite the House to draw its own conclusion from the Libyans' repeated failure to respond positively.

[Mr. Lloyd]

The sanctions imposed by the Security Council on Libya more than six years ago are still in force because of Libyan intransigence, and we must not forget that. The greatest kindness that Libya's friends could render would be to persuade the Libyan authorities to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions forthwith.

We will continue our search for justice for the sake of the families—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at thirteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 22 July 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mutual Societies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I am fortunate to have secured this debate literally on the eve of the announcement of the conversion ballot for the Nationwide building society, the largest mutual organisation in the country. It is therefore an appropriate time for Parliament to take stock of the current position, and to look to the future of mutual societies.

It is difficult to underestimate the contribution that mutual organisations have made since the formation of the first friendly society more than 200 years ago. Whether we look at the self-help welfare state that was created by the friendly societies in the inter-war period, the home ownership revolution brought about by building societies or the empowerment of full-income consumers by co-operatives, we can see that the self-help and mutual movement has had a dramatic impact on the lives of ordinary people in this country. It continues to do so.

The movement also influences Government—most recently, in the search for the elusive third way between the unfettered capitalism of the 1980s and the straight socialism of the past. I believe that mutuality is synonymous with the third way.

That fact was underlined in a recent article in the *New Statesman*, by a commentator who dubbed the so-called third way "mutualism". Ministers have vied to define its objectives. The Green Paper entitled "New Ambitions for our Country: A New Contract for Welfare" explicitly supports that policy when it states:

"Mutual organisations should play a greater role in the provision of welfare in the next century."

That statement relates partly to the failure of the financial services industry to act as a guardian of our savings and our pensions. It is also grounded in the belief in both the limitations of state provision and the unacceptability of privatising the welfare state. Thus mutual organisations are the sensible third way forward.

In a recent speech, the Minister for Welfare Reform suggested the development of approved welfare providers whose central requirement would be that they were owned and controlled by their members—that is, that they be mutual in both character and definition. The Government clearly support the principle and practice of mutuality, yet many mutuals face sustained attack, partly because of their success. How can that be? I believe that it relates to the failure of the Building Societies Act 1997 to provide any safeguards for societies against the activities of carpetbaggers and the impact that that that has on their businesses. As a result, their very mutuality is, or will be, perceived as a hindrance to their future success.

Before considering that issue, I must comment on the value of mutual organisations in the financial services marketplace. The consumer benefits from access to the services and products that mutual organisations provide. Societies offer choice to the consumer, and they are popular. Although the remaining societies constitute only 27 per cent. of the mortgage market, they have lent more to customers in the past year than the big banks combined.

Survey after survey confirms that building societies come top in terms of customer service and friendliness. They provide diversity through their different structures and different objectives. Mutuals are able to take a longer-term perspective, as they are not driven by the need to boost their share prices continually, or to maximise dividends to their shareholders.

Many societies are regionally and even locally based, which brings them closer to their customers, and many play a significant role in the local community. There is a building society head office in each of the 12 regions of the United Kingdom, where they are an important source of local employment, living standards and decision making. Building societies provide stability in the market—not for them the false attractions of property speculation or secondary banking.

History shows that banks with excess capital are tempted into unwise investments. As a result, no savings have been lost in building societies this century. Thus building societies are truly prudential organisations, but, most importantly, they provide competition to the banks and other institutions in the financial services sector.

Building societies have a margin advantage, which allows them to offer cheaper mortgages, or savings accounts that pay more on average. The difference between the interest that they receive on mortgages and that which they pay out on savings ranges from 1.2 to 1.7 per cent. The equivalent margin for their demutualised rivals ranges from 1.9 to 2.5 per cent.—a considerable advantage. That was commented on recently by none other than the chairman of the Building Societies Commission, who explained:

"As Mutual Societies do not have to pay dividends to external shareholders, they will always have a margin advantage over banks".

However, mortgage lending is generally considered to be low-risk and, as a result, low-return—not a natural market for profit-maximising companies. In a recent survey, the Consumers Association compared a range of core products—savings accounts, TESSAs, mortgages and overdrafts—and found that consumers would have been nearly £1,600 better off over a five-year period with a building society than with a bank.

Building societies also act as a competitive restraint on the banks. Without them, banks would charge customers even more for their mortgages, and pay even less to their savers. The question posed in this debate is: how do we preserve for future generations the right to those cheaper mortgages and higher savings rates? That is particularly relevant as the building society sector has been undergoing rapid change in the past few years, culminating in the conversion of five of the largest societies last year. Although that still leaves 70 societies with more than £130 billion in assets, the recent windfall

[Mr. Andrew Love]

gains to members have created a climate that threatens the very mutuality that allows members to vote themselves that benefit.

It is clear that societies, which must survive in a cut-throat, competitive market, cannot continue to be diverted from their core business activities to defend their mutual status. If those attacks continue—even if unsuccessfully—societies will probably be faced with the unpalatable choice of continuing to defend their position against increasing odds or accepting that it would be better for their business and for their other stakeholders to convert on their own terms. That would reduce the number of societies to below the level that would make for a sustainable mutual sector, and would inevitably lead to its elimination from the financial services market.

Many of us would argue that there is a systemic interest in maintaining mutuality, not because it is an inherently superior form of organisation, but because there is a need for a mixed ownership structure in the financial services sector for the reasons that I have already outlined. If that is accepted, mutuality becomes a public policy issue, and the Government and Parliament must take an interest in ensuring that consumers do not lose as a result of the continued conversions. How can that be done while protecting both member control and democracy, which are the unique selling points of mutual organisations?

Societies are looking for fairness, not favours—the creation of a legal framework that will allow them to compete on a level playing field in the financial services sector. The Minister has already shown the way by raising the threshold for conversion to 50 per cent., but fundamental decisions about the future of a mutual society—the most important decision that a member can take—should require a significant level of support before demutualisation. After all, converted societies can be subject to takeover only if 75 per cent. of shareholders vote to confirm that action.

As recent events have shown, the rules on the election of candidates to boards of directors are set at a level that can easily be exploited by a small band of eccentric or dissident individuals. The democracy of a mutual organisation should be protected against frivolous candidatures, in the same way as Members of Parliament are protected in general elections.

To be nominated a Member of Parliament requires 10 electors in an average constituency of 67,000 electors, which is one for every 6,700. Nationwide, the largest mutual, has just under 5 million members; the Bradford and Bingley has 2.2 million members. To be nominated a member of Nationwide requires only one nomination for every 100,000 members; and to be nominated a member of the Bradford and Bingley requires only one nomination for every 44,000 members.

Are not building societies being significantly disadvantaged by allowing their equivalent to the Monster Raving Loony party to continue to disrupt their activities? To put it another way, is it unreasonable to set the threshold for candidates around a level that the nation finds acceptable for its democratic elections?

Membership of a society should be for those who have an interest in its activities, not for those who are only interested in asset-stripping the society for their own benefit. During the past year, 1.3 million new members have joined Nationwide. They could undermine the majority of longer-standing members who voted overwhelmingly to maintain the society's mutual status at last year's annual meeting. To gain ownership rights in a society, an applicant should have been a member for a minimum period. That returns societies to their original ideal of requiring their new customers to save with the society before gaining membership or its benefits.

In addition, the protections of a society's legal status are being eroded in the current campaign. The resolution submitted to the annual general meeting of Nationwide by a proponent of demutualisation means in practice that the decision to convert can now be approved as a result of a straightforward majority of those voting. It is difficult to see how the society could resist the moral pressure, despite the fact that the strict legal requirements have not been met.

Is it reasonable to make societies go through the disruption and uncertainty that is inherent in the frivolous campaigns now being mounted? They have the ability to stand every year with impunity and with little financial outlay, yet the cost to societies in terms of mounting a reasonable defence and in terms of disruption to their business in enormous. I understand that last year's campaign for Nationwide cost some £2 million, and it will cost even more this year. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the framework of regulation should provide stability, and ensure that societies cannot be held to ransom by a small and unrepresentative group of people who have no commitment to the objectives of the mutual organisations of which they are members.

Mutual societies have been with us for more than 200 years, and have more than 100 years of expertise in the savings and mortgage markets. If they and their expertise are not to be undermined, action will be necessary to deal with the difficulties and disruption that threaten their future existence.

9.48 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I am delighted to speak after the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), and I congratulate him on securing the debate and on its exquisite timing, given the Nationwide ballot that takes place tomorrow. He hid his light under a bushel, because he has successfully chaired the all-party building societies group since being elected to the House last year. It has been my pleasure for the past seven years to chair a sister group, the all-party insurance and financial services group, and I have greatly enjoyed working with him. I agree with much of what he said, and he went over some of the ground that our group has covered in recent years.

Before I continue, I should remind hon. Members of my interests in the insurance broking profession; they will inform what I have to say, rather than be of any direct benefit to insurance brokers and intermediaries.

The all-party insurance and financial services group addressed mutuality twice in 1996. I have been able to return to what we discussed in preparation for the debate, because the briefing papers prepared for the group by Price Waterhouse were published in a bound volume. We considered the building society mutualisation issue, and concluded that mutuals have an extremely important role to play.

Our general conclusion was that there is a need for a mixed economy, and some of the smaller building societies in Yorkshire such as the Skipton, the

Scarborough, the Leeds and Holbeck, and the Yorkshire were especially helpful in addressing our thoughts. The hon. Member for Edmonton mentioned the Bradford and Bingley; one could filibuster for half an hour by reading out all the names, but there is no need to do that today.

The hon. Member for Edmonton was exactly right to say that the record shows that smaller societies are giving a better return to savers and a more competitive mortgage rate to borrowers than many of the larger societies. I have had my mortgage in Yorkshire with the Halifax for 21 years; in London, I am with the Cheltenham and Gloucester, which offered an extremely competitive deal when I took out the loan on my current house. The important point for hon. Members is that, if all the mutual societies were stripped away, demutualised big banks and building societies would result in a less competitive market, especially if all the business ended up in the hands of the few.

It could be argued that there are too many societies—the same argument applies in life assurance—but, overall, we should be in no doubt that the markets for savings and for mortgages would be less competitive if all the smaller societies disappeared. That is why I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Edmonton that it is a matter of public policy that there should be a structure for those societies to flourish.

The outcome of tomorrow's Nationwide vote will help to determine whether the Building Societies Act 1997 is adequate. I pressed the previous Government to go further, and to take stronger action against the carpetbaggers. Sadly, we were not able to prevail in the argument, although, as the hon. Member for Edmonton knows, his predecessor as chairman of the all-party building societies group, Mr. Douglas French, did a great deal to further the argument and the legislation.

Mutuality also extends into life assurance, pensions and friendly societies. Five of the top 10 life assurance companies in this country are mutuals, and mutual companies have always been especially strong in the with-profits field of business. There have been arguments in the recent past about whether societies such as Standard Life, the National Provident Institution, Friends Provident and so on will be able to survive as mutuals. It is to their credit that they have made it clear that that is their wish.

In the case of Norwich Union, different factors were at play, because it owned one of the largest general insurance companies, and its real value could never be realised for its policyholders. Its demutualisation was extremely successful, but it showed that there is no clear way in which everyone should go: there is a need for some societies to remain mutual and for some to enjoy the benefits of plc status.

The argument on mutuality for life assurers is more complex than for building societies, and we must be aware of some dangers. The first is that history shows that several mutual life assurance companies got into difficulty and were absorbed by other mutual societies. For example, Friends Provident absorbed the United Kingdom Provident Institution some years ago. Although that shows the strength of the industry as a whole, it also shows that mutuality in itself is not a guarantee of success. There is still a requirement for proper management and efficiency.

One reason why many mutual life assurance companies have not performed as well as they should is because their new business costs have been far too high. They have tried to get more business, but have neglected the effect of that on the overall performance of their with-profits fund. I think that my remarks will be dear to the heart of the Economic Secretary to the Treasury: whether a company is mutual or plc—there is potential for combining them—it is crucial to bring down the cost of new business to more sensible levels, so that members and policyholders derive the true benefit of their investments.

A great deal of inefficiency in the life industry was obscured by the old life assurance premium relief, which was abolished in 1985. There was a great hue and cry in the industry when the relief was abolished—it was said that that would be the end of everything—but abolition made the industry more efficient. In whatever form companies exist, the taxation arrangements within which they have to do business are important—I know that the Economic Secretary appreciates that.

I want to sound a slightly controversial note: the scale of it remains to be seen, but there is a problem because policyholders of mutual life assurance companies will have to pay towards the cost of compensation for pensions mis-selling. I have raised this matter several times in the House, and I know that the problem arose under the previous Government, not this one.

People who belong to mutual societies through buying a life assurance policy must take an interest in the way the society is run. There will undoubtedly be some squeals in a year or two about the extent to which some policyholders have to pay for the compensation arrangements for others. We must ensure that the arrangements under which the phase 2 review in particular is conducted are fair to all, and that we bear in mind the interests of policyholders who will not be compensated, but who will contribute to others.

What do we really mean by mutuality? Is it simply a matter of structure, or is there a philosophical argument? The philosophical argument has often been rubbished by City commentators, who have said that it has no real benefit.

A year ago, Loughborough university published an excellent paper entitled "Reflections on the Mutuality and Future of Building Societies", featuring research carried out for the Building Societies Association. The paper comments:

> "Philosophical issues about the 'true nature' of mutuality are a diversion and are largely irrelevant: the key issue is whether mutuals do or do not add value efficiently for consumers."

I agree with that.

I think that there is a philosophical argument. Mutual status can be about shared ownership—I know that the Minister has stakeholder pension funds in mind—but it is entirely conceivable that we may enter a phase in which mutual funds will be necessary if we are to gain the administrative efficiency that is so necessary to keeping down the costs of new business I mentioned. In such a phase, the funds would belong entirely to the policyholders, investors or future pensioners, but might well be administered and managed by plcs because of the size of the task involved.

Having worked in the insurance industry for a long time, I believe that mutuality is about the philosophy: it is about the way in which people do business, and about relationships. In the early days of the life assurance industry, and our great insurance industry—which has led the world in new developments for at least two

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centuries—the mutual philosophy, the philosophy of uniting to solve problems that could not be solved in any other way, characterised the companies as they were formed.

What has gone wrong in the insurance industry over the past 10 to 20 years is that, in many quarters, the drive to create new business has become more important than addressing the needs of members. Today's debate is important not just in regard to events today and tomorrow affecting the Nationwide building society, but in giving us an opportunity to see a wider picture.

As the excellent Loughborough university paper points out, in the end the argument will be about whether mutuality adds value. That argument is as much about efficiency as it is about offering the best returns. We should tell the financial services world that we believe the future lies in giving a better service to investors and policyholders, and we should bear in mind the need for structures of taxation and legislation that allow that philosophy to flourish. If we can achieve that, we can achieve for future generations of investors, pensioners and policyholders the better returns to which they are entitled.

10.3 am

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing the debate at such an appropriate time.

Although we are discussing the future of mutuality, let me briefly remind the House that my constituency is the birthplace of one of its strands. In 1820, Dr. William King, Elizabeth Fry, Lady Byron and others set up the Brighton co-operative society and the Brighton provident society in West street, in the heart of my constituency. Last week, as a Nationwide member and mortgage holder, I visited the society's branch in that same West street in order to cast my vote.

There is no doubt that the notion of mutuality has again captured the imaginations of a great many people in the past three or four years. Last year, more people voted in the Nationwide ballot than in the Welsh referendum. I am glad to say that, in both cases, I agreed with the result of the vote, and I hope that the same will be true of the Nationwide ballot whose results will be announced in a day or so.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) spoke of the philosophy of mutuality, and it seems to me that the notion of mutual trust is at the heart of that philosophy. Although I do not agree with everything I hear on "Today", I was interested by the results of a survey commissioned by the BBC earlier this year on behalf of that programme. People were asked which kind of organisation they would most trust to help them to choose the best mortgage for their circumstances. Of those who responded, 8 per cent. chose converted building societies, 23 per cent. chose traditional banks, and 44 per cent. chose the existing mutual building societies. It is vital for us to keep in mind that element of trust, as well as the financial and regulatory framework that we are rightly considering this morning.

It is, I think, no accident that some of the larger public limited companies have assumed a veneer of mutuality through the spate of loyalty cards and club cards that we have seen over the past year or so. They are playing on that important theme of mutual organisations: the notion of being—dare I use this term?; I shall, as we have talked about the third way—a stakeholder.

Like, I suspect, a few other hon. Members, I come from a generation for whom the divvy from the Co-op was an important part of the household finances. In matters of insurance, my generation turned not to the huge insurance companies, but to the Oddfellows, the Buffaloes or the Foresters—the mutual friendly societies that, in many working-class homes, formed the basis of the household economy, along with the Co-op.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton mentioned the welfare reform Green Paper. That paper, along with many of the other discussion documents that have been published, offers a future to the friendly society and the mutual organisation as we look to the reform of the welfare state and the pensions system.

I am sure that many other hon. Members were inundated last year, as I was, by the plethora of unwanted faxes churned out by shady organisations spending their time spotting the building societies that were likely to be the next converts, and advising people how to make a killing straight away. All the faxes that I received went back where they came from, but I am interested in one aspect of the challenge to the mutual building societies that we have seen over the past few years.

In one respect at least, it has been good for them. I thought a little before saying that, but I think that some societies were in danger of becoming complacent, and they have had to think rather more imaginatively than they might otherwise have done about the service that they offer their members—not just about attracting new customers.

Building societies have risen to that challenge remarkably well, which is why, in the nine months to June this year, they captured 40 per cent. of the new lending market. In 1997, 13 of the 15 cheapest lenders were mutual building societies. Between 1992 and 1997, eight of the top performing TESSAs were offered by mutual building societies. They offer competitive mortgages and competitive rates to savers.

I welcomed last year's announcement by the Economic Secretary on the requirement for a 50 per cent. turnout, and perhaps we should consider whether that should be even higher. The Government should turn their attention to the issue of the required number of nominees for directors of mutual building societies, and to the qualifications that we would expect of nominees for directorships, although I am not sure how that could be arranged. We need to ensure that they are in tune with the ethos of the organisation that they seek to guide by becoming directors.

I hope that the mutuals will have a bright future. We have been reminded that friendly societies have similar arrangements. Moreover, the Automobile Association is one of the leading mutual-type organisations because of the way in which it structures its relationship with its members. The mutuality field is wide.

I await with anticipation the results of the vote on the board of Nationwide and on whether it should consider converting. I hope that the vote will be against conversion, because that would give a clear message to other building societies and other carpetbaggers. It would put to rest, for a few years at least, the threat to mutuality, and would allow the mutual building societies to get on with the job that we all want them to do.

10.11 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing this debate, and on leading an effective all-party campaign. He has maintained the support of hon. Members from all three parties for the building society movement, and that has been a substantial contributory factor to the mature level of debate about this issue in the country. It is helpful that he has chosen to debate not just building societies, but the mutuality principle at large. The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) captured the broader issue very well.

I shall perhaps be a little controversial, because I have been struck by the paradoxical approach of the new Government. There is a genuine enthusiasm for mutuality. Members of the Government, such as the Minister for Welfare Reform, clearly believe passionately in the principle, and recognise its effectiveness in attacking many social problems. They understand the culture in which the principle of mutuality grew up. I have heard the Economic Secretary speak about her roots in the west of Scotland, and she clearly understands how the movement originated and its strengths.

However, the Government have often fallen over backwards to avoid doing anything that could be seen as overly sympathetic to the mutual institutions. Whether that is because of the conservatism of the Treasury or pressure from the banks, I do not know. There are several ways in which the Government could be a good deal more proactive in support of mutual institutions.

The case for building societies has already been well made. I emphasise that building societies are not a quaint, old-fashioned relic. We are not talking about institutions that should be preserved for the museum of financial institutions, but about institutions that are very effective in the marketplace. They offer highly competitive returns to their depositors, and competitive rates to borrowers because of the small margins on which they operate. In the past year, they have considerably increased their market share in a competitive marketplace, without subsidy or preference.

The dangerous assumption has been made that, because building societies have been very competitive in the mortgage market, they are strong enough to hold off pressures from carpetbaggers. Building societies have a particular, built-in, institutional weakness. Unlike plcs, which raise capital from the marketplace through new issues, building societies expand through accumulating reserves. That pot of gold attracts people who want pay-outs today rather than to think of the long term. Those reserves are inherently vulnerable, so it is important to have a system of regulation that recognises their vulnerability.

The previous and the present Governments have made a genuine attempt to strike a sensible balance between protection and exposure to pressure from members. I suspect that the balance may be wrong, but we shall see in the next day or so what has happened. The Government have taken a calculated risk. We hope that they are right, but it is possible that they have gambled wrongly.

If Nationwide goes down in the next 24 hours, it is clear that the other two big societies, Bradford and Bingley, and Britannia, will not survive much longer. Most of the smaller societies will be acquired fairly quickly by the banks. Within a relatively short time, there will be little left of the building societies movement. Let us hope that that does not happen, but there is a very real risk that it will.

If it does not happen, I hope that the Government will think again about some of the measures that have been suggested by building societies to protect them from carpetbaggers. The Economic Secretary deserves some credit for having partially responded to the problem, by changing the thresholds. Some of the other measures proposed are still as relevant as ever.

It is possible to have too much democracy. Hon. Members would not want monthly or yearly general elections. That would no doubt increase democracy, but it would not necessarily make for better democracy. It would not make for better democracy if people were able to stand for Parliament without putting up a deposit. There must be hurdles. We are talking about quality as well as quantity.

Some of the riders suggested by building societies are appropriate. I say that with some caution, because I happen to have in my constituency the headquarters of the Building Societies Members Association, which is concerned about building society democracy, and frequently complains about building society managers ignoring members' rights. That is an important dimension, but even taking that into account, further regulatory provisions are required to prevent building societies from being too easily rolled over by carpetbaggers.

The hon. Member for Edmonton has suggested some provisions, but the key ones are to raise the number of people required to nominate board members, and the number of people who can introduce a resolution. It would still be a relatively small number—a few hundred rather than 50—but they would be important additional provisos. Increasing the time gap between people becoming members and voting in an election is another small change that could be crucial in shifting the balance within building societies. I hope that the Economic Secretary will have a fresh look at such provisions, especially if the building societies survive this ordeal by fire.

The Government should also examine the regulatory and tax provisions that apply to other mutuals. One of the most depressing features of this year's Finance Bill was the rather abrupt way in which the Treasury dealt with the taxation provisions applying to friendly societies. They are a small part of the savings market, but they are very important for low-income savers, especially those for whom the traditional instrument is the £20-a-month, long-term, 10-year, insurance-linked savings bond. Many working-class families have traditionally used that as a way of setting aside money for a rainy day.

Under current tax provisions, the tax-free allowance is low. Prompted by the Association of Friendly Societies, I suggested during debates on the Finance Bill that that should be raised. It was raised slowly under the previous Government, and the present Government should be more ambitious. My suggestion was slapped down on the grounds that it would involve cost, although that is almost certainly wrong, because the introduction of tax-free savings increases the amount of taxable savings in the friendly societies. Whatever the technicalities, the Government should look closely at the matter. Friendly societies are important and should be encouraged, especially in the new environment of individual savings accounts.

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

The regulation of friendly societies should be examined. The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) contains the first ever friendly society, the Braemar. He has said that such societies are small, and deal with small savers. The regulatory costs for serving such savers are prohibitive, and far in excess of the amounts involved. The system of regulation is often heavy-handed. It was probably introduced with good intentions, but it is not properly applicable to institutions such as friendly societies. I hope that the Government will look at that.

Another type of mutual society has not been mentioned today, but it deserves scrutiny. Credit unions are important in the United States. There may be good reasons for the movement's greater size there, where the banking and building society movements did not develop as they did in Britain. Credit unions are underdeveloped here, and they could be much bigger. The Government should examine the regulatory system under which they operate. There were changes in, I think, 1996, when the previous Government raised the savings threshold for credit unions. The National Consumer Council has suggested that that could be creatively updated and revised.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) spoke about life assurance companies. Building societies, credit unions, friendly societies and life assurance companies are different aspects of the mutual movement. The Government and previous Governments have tended to look at the problems piecemeal. By way of the Prime Minister's social exclusion unit or through some such all-embracing body, the whole issue of mutual institutions could be examined in the round. Their tax and regulatory treatment could be studied comprehensively to see whether mutuality could be boosted. That should not be done by giving them unreasonable protection, and they should certainly not be protected from market competition, but we should see whether a much more friendly environment can be created. I hope that the Economic Secretary can lift the issue out of the narrow Treasury, regulatory and tax environment, into a much broader context.

10.22 am

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing the debate, and on his work on the all-party building societies group.

I should like to declare three interests. First, I have a private pension with Equitable Life. I chose that company because I wanted profits from investments to be returned to members, rather than being given to shareholders with no other interest in the society. Secondly, I am secretary of the all-party occupational pensions group. Such pensions are provided by a mutual association which has provided an enormous amount of benefit in this century, and suffer from many of the problems that are faced by building societies. Thirdly, I am currently undertaking an Industry and Parliament Trust fellowship with the Nationwide building society. *[Interruption.]* I have no inside information on the vote. As I am sure hon. Members know, the Nationwide is not conducting the count: it is being scrutinised externally.

Like many hon. Members who have been on other IPT fellowships, I am grateful to Nationwide staff for their time, care and patience. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that, at this time, the Nationwide staff are busy, but they explained their organisation to us, told us what makes it tick, and gave us an insight into a complex and impressive operation.

The public rely on mutual organisations, particularly building societies, to conduct some of the most serious financial transactions of their lives. Those people are in it long-term, and without the building society movement there would not be the present property-owning democracy. However, as hon. Members have said, that is being prejudiced by the get-rich-quick philosophy of the 1980s, which is still with us in the shape of the demutualisation carpetbaggers.

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): Does my hon. Friend agree that, after the last major demutualisation, there was so much money sloshing about that it distorted the retail economy? We may still be suffering from that, and perhaps that major input of money has caused interest rates to be slightly higher than they might otherwise have been.

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend is right. I understand that the windfall produced a cash injection larger than that stimulated by any Budget since the war.

People who invest in building societies are exercising choice, rather like the choice that is exercised in investing in a greyhound. If they watch it going around the track a few times and decide that they do not like how it runs, they should not try to vote to convert it into the hare. They have invested in a greyhound, and they are stuck with it.

Such reasoning applies to executives and board members, as well as to members of societies. If people want to join the board of a financial organisation that focuses on maximising profits to shareholders, they should get themselves elected to a bank. For people who are on the board of a mutual organisation, no amount of free shares, share options or other freebies should encourage them to abandon the basis of the organisation to which they have been elected.

I do not accept the business case for conversion. Other hon. Members have set out the grounds for that, and I shall not go over them. There is a compelling business case, now being demonstrated in a competitive market, that mutual organisations have the edge. For example, the current standard bank variable rate is 8.95 per cent., but the building society rate is about 8.1 per cent. That is because the costs of converted building societies are increased by about 40 per cent. by the need to pay savers. I would prefer those moneys to go back to investors. In June last year, the Paymaster General said:

"Abbey National, which was the first mutual society to convert, has largely maintained its customer profile."—[*Official Report*, 23 June 1997; Vol.296, c. 653.]

Despite demutualisation, experience to date is good. Since that time, the outlook has not been so rosy, because money is flowing into the mutuals, attracted by their competitive advantage. It is interesting to note that the chief executive of Abbey National bank plc was quoted as saying at about that time:

"there is no long-term future in the mortgage market".

It is not surprising that the bank takes that view, because it seems that it simply cannot compete.

There is another reason for the importance of building societies, and it relates to their local and regional functions. To get a mortgage decision from some banks, it is necessary only to make a call on an anonymous phone line, answer a series of questions, and, regardless of one's personal position, family or area, get a decision that is generated purely by computer. Building societies have a local focus, and are adaptable.

There is a third difference, and it is in the way that building societies do business. They are owned by their members, and any profit belongs to the customers. They are judged on their services to customers, not on the profit made for the organisation. I can give an example of that from the time that I worked with the Nationwide. It was approached by some mortgage brokers and asked whether it would promote a certain policy. The brokers presented it to the society on the basis: "Your members want this protection, and there will be a reasonable premium, but the payout will be very low, so you and I will be able to make a considerable profit."

Had the building society been a bank, it would have been prepared to accept that deal. However, as it was owned by its members, it said, "So you want us to promote a policy to our members which is not actually in their interests or to their benefit. Although they may think they need this cover, you and I know that the payouts will be low, which means that there is no value in it for our members. No, we are not prepared to do that." That is the crucial difference in the way that membership affects business decisions.

I appreciate the fine balance that the Government must ensure between proper financial regulation and encouraging the mutual market. I echo much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) said. The Government should not be tempted by the fence—sitting on it is not appropriate, for the reasons given by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable)—particularly the competition between the carpetbaggers and the long-term interest.

I invite the Government to consider four areas. The first is the number of members needed to kick start demutualisation.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a danger of pure short-term greed prevailing over long-term loss of customer choice? In my constituency is one of the smallest building societies in Britain, the Chorley building society. We are worried that, if people cash their chips overnight, that will be the end of customer choice in my area, because the society is too small to become a bank. I am sure that that is also true of societies in other constituencies.

Mr. Lock: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government need to raise the number of members needed to kick-start demutualisation.

The second area is the number of people needed to nominate to a board, which is also low. Thirdly, there is the turnout needed for success. Unions in the workplace need a 40 per cent. turnout, but only 25 per cent. is needed to sell off someone's financial heritage. The percentage should be raised. There should be a time limit on anyone who votes in a ballot. Selling off long-standing assets should be the privilege only of those members who have had a long-standing interest in the society.

10.33 am

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): In my brief speech, I want to concentrate on the bandits who call themselves demutualisers. I need no excuse to include in that Murray Financial, from which the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) gets £12,000 a year. Out of courtesy, I notified the right hon. Gentleman that I might have a little chat about him this morning.

Ken Murray, who launched Murray Financial, is an old hand at banditry. He set up the Cairngorm investment trust and J. P. Cairngorm. Despite the view of the right hon. Member for Wokingham, the company is a bandits' trust for demutualisation. An article in the *Financial Times* last September stated that Cairngorm claimed that the

"imminent restructuring of the UK financial services sector will be the biggest single money-making opportunity in the UK over coming years, and will provide enormous potential for profit for those who have the vision to take advantage of this change."

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. McNulty: Very briefly.

Mr. Purchase: I will be brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this matter, and I want to add to the sum of his knowledge. Birmingham Midshires building society is a victim of the very tactic referred to by my hon. Friend, and it needs strongly to resist it.

Mr. McNulty: I thank my hon. Friend for that information. I am aware that that building society is based in Wolverhampton, despite its name.

The *Financial Times* said that those bandits, through their advertising, are targeting the general public rather than institutional investors. It says that they offer

"handsome financial inducements to financial advisers who recommend the trust to clients. The words 'mug punters' spring to mind."

Effectively, they are the financial boot boys of the 1990s, doing in just as crooked a way what the pension mis-sellers were doing in the 1980s. They should be declared as such. It would be a travesty for anyone on the Opposition Front Bench to have anything to do with them.

Mr. Murray has said:

"There are over 100 sizeable financial institutions. In 10 years, there will be six to eight."

The clear implication, especially for mutual building societies, is that he wants his gravy, he wants his cut from demutualisation, he wants it now, and he does not care about the services rendered by the mutuals, about their strengths or about their virtues. His plan is to asset-strip and wreck, and he is now focusing on the mutual societies.

Unfortunately, the trail of City cronies with the blood of mutual societies on their hands does not end at Mr. Murray's doorstep. The right hon. Member for Wokingham will be assisted in his future conquests of consumer choice by two other expert hands. His fellow

[Mr. McNulty]

directors at Murray Financial include Philip Court, the former chief executive of the Birmingham Midshires building society—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is sailing close to the wind in his references to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). I remind him that, if he wishes to launch a full criticism of another right hon. or hon. Member, he must do so by substantive motion, not in the way that he is doing now.

Mr. McNulty: I appreciate that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In addition to Philip Court, who was also involved in Cairngorm with Mr. Murray, the directors include Chris Jones, a former executive with the Cheltenham and Gloucester building society, which is now part of Lloyds TSB. One has already overseen the demutualisation of a building society, and both have insider knowledge of how they operate. Both are, in effect, demutualising henchmen, out for a quick buck and no more. They could not care less about the services that mutuals provide.

Other connections could be made. The company directors' register lists a number of companies, principally in Glasgow, called Murray—Murray this, Murray that and Murray the other. I do not suggest that they are all linked to Murray Financial, but one of them, Murray Enterprise, has as one of its directors a Mr. C. Jones—who may or may not be related to the C. Jones who was formerly of Cheltenham and Gloucester building society and who is now a demutualisation bandit. Murray Enterprise is part of a reputable group in Scotland, part of which is chaired by the newly ennobled George Younger. He also happens to be chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland. That is fine; I am not suggesting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must bear in mind that, when he is referring to a Member of the other place, he should call him the noble Lord. The stricture that I applied in the case of the right hon. Member for Wokingham also applies to Members of the other place.

Mr. McNulty: I fully accept that, too, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

All that I will say in passing about the Royal Bank of Scotland is that it has just recently confirmed a £4 million overdraft for the Conservative party.

Perhaps we should not worry unnecessarily about the record of Cairngorm or Murray Financial, because they are not particularly good at what they do—but they do it on the back of money they take from private investors. If they are not pension mis-sellers, they may be the Barlow Clowes of the 1990s. Either way, they are corporate charlatans. They are raising funds with the aim of wrecking mutual societies.

I say to Conservative Members who dabble with mutual society wreckers that they may prefer to join a new Brit pop band that happens to be called Redwood, rather than the predatory bandits from Murray Financial, who, as demutualisers, come bearing gifts but ultimately want to asset-strip and no more.

It is a real pity that any hon. Member is remotely involved in such disreputable business. No one is suggesting that any hon. Member has used their position to change the policies of the House—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not by clear implication accuse another hon. Member of disreputable behaviour. It would be proper for the hon. Gentleman to withdraw that remark, or to make it clear that he did not intend to make such an accusation.

Mr. McNulty: I certainly shall, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was referring to the disreputable business of those companies; I would not impugn any hon. Member for behaving disreputably. I fully and happily withdraw the remark.

If anyone in the corporate sector wants anything to do with demutualisers such as Murray Financial, he or she should think twice. Demutualisers are not there to serve the interests of mutual societies' current or future savers. I heartily endorse what hon. Members on both sides of the House have said in this debate—long may mutual societies continue. I hope that the resounding vote at Nationwide shows the way ahead.

10.40 am

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): I should state at the outset that I have twice been a beneficiary of cash payments—once as a result of being a long-standing investor with the National and Provincial building society, and once as a result of being a policyholder with Scottish Amicable.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing this debate. He, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and I have fairly recently emerged blinking into the daylight after considering the Finance Bill in Committee for eight weeks. It is a pleasure to be reunited again so soon.

In his time in the House, the hon. Member for Edmonton has already shown a close and informed interest in the future of building societies. Today, once again, he has cogently stated his case. I generally share his support for the institution of mutuality, and his wish for it to continue—although I am not quite sure that I am as gloomy about its prospects as some hon. Members who have spoken today.

This has been an harmonious and useful debate, although I regret the rather sour note that entered into it in the previous speech. Today is not an occasion to try to make cheap party political comments. The speech of the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) reflects badly on him, not on my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Mutual societies in the United Kingdom go back over 200 years. They were created by their members to help themselves obtain that most basic need—a house. As a Conservative, I instinctively support the principle of self-help. I believe that there could be a continuing role for mutual societies in the provision of welfare benefits more generally, as an adjunct to, if not a substitute for, the state. I am told by the hon. Member for Edmonton that such self-help may be some version of "the third way", but I have always regarded it is a sound Conservative principle. However, I do not wish to be drawn down the path of party political philosophy.

Although there has been over the years a steady decline in the number of mutual societies—some were wound up as termination societies, whereas others merged—only in the past 10 years has the building society sector changed beyond recognition. There is no doubt that some mutual societies had become somewhat remote from their members. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) strongly made that point, and drew attention to the fact that some societies have concentrated more on trying to attract new business, consequently sometimes neglecting the interests of current policyholders. Consequently, the advantages of mutuality have perhaps become less apparent.

There is also no doubt that increasing competition from other financial institutions has put pressure on societies to offer a wider range of services to their members.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): If mutuality is such a sound Conservative principle, will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to dissociate himself from those who advocate demutualisation or associate themselves with demutualisers?

Mr. Whittingdale: As I shall say later, the merits or demerits of mutuality versus plc status are finely balanced. Although there are advantages in mutuality, retaining that status is a matter not for me but for a society's members. The position of both the previous Government and the current Government has been that the decision is for the membership. However, I shall expand on those points later.

The history of the change goes back only about 10 years. The Building Societies Act 1986 was the first legislation to allow building societies to become banks if they wished to do so, and it was a liberalising measure. It also allowed mutual societies to provide more services while remaining mutual. The Act led to the flotation, as we know, of Abbey National, Woolwich, Alliance and Leicester, and all the other societies that have converted. However, in each case, the decision was taken by the membership itself.

The attraction of releasing the capital—in the form of cash payments or shares—that was locked up in the societies was, of course, one of the principal motives for those voting in favour of a flotation. Although there is not necessarily anything wrong with such a motive, it is not the only reason for demutualisation—the pros and cons of which, as I said, are finely balanced.

The Building Societies (Distributions) Act 1997, which was passed with all-party support in the final days of the previous Parliament, has already been mentioned in this debate. Some hon. Members have said that that Act was intended to make it easier for societies to convert. However, it did not seek to influence members' decision, and further liberalised the rules governing building societies to enable them to compete more equally with other financial institutions. As the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury said on the Second Reading—in an accurate, if not entirely original, comment—the purpose of the Bill was to give societies a "level playing field".

In the same debate, the then Opposition spokesman said:

"Labour's position on conversion is that it is for members to decide whether they want their building society to convert or to remain as a mutual."—[*Official Report*, 10 March 1997; Vol. 292, c. 82.]

That position is, of course, right, and it has always been the position of the Conservative party. However, I entirely accept—as several hon. Members have said in this debate—that there is benefit in diversity in the financial services sector, to provide competition and choice for customers.

Mutual status brings advantages, and it is important to recognise them. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale mentioned the philosophy of mutuality, and that point was picked up by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper). Undoubtedly some investors regard mutual societies as a safer and more sympathetic haven for their money.

Mutual societies also have clear economic advantages. Professor David Llewellyn has compared the records of mutuals and plcs and—as the hon. Member for Edmonton said—stated that societies undoubtedly have a "margin advantage" due to the absence of external capital that has to be remunerated, allowing societies both to build up their reserves and to offer highly competitive mortgage and saving rates.

That advantage has been borne out in practice. As several hon. Members have said, the current margin spread is greater for societies that have converted than for those remaining as societies. Consequently, remaining building societies have been very successful in winning increased market share. Building societies are therefore fighting back effectively.

In the next 24 hours, we shall learn the outcome of the vote of the Nationwide membership. I was interested to hear that the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) is undertaking, or has just completed, an Industry and Parliament trust fellowship, and entirely endorse his comments on the value of those fellowships. It is perhaps surprising that the Nationwide vote is occurring only a year after the previous one, in which candidates wishing to demutualise the society were rejected. Although it would be premature to speculate on the result, like other hon. Members I hope that Nationwide members will once again firmly endorse the board's position.

Events at Nationwide demonstrate some of the problems that have been mentioned by every hon. Member who has spoken so far—the instability and uncertainty caused for mutual societies by perpetual pressure, often from a minority of investors, to demutualise and become a plc. We have heard stories about queues outside building societies, telephone systems being inundated with calls and the difficulties that has caused to genuine investors.

There are some safeguards. Some societies have tried to deter speculators by raising their minimum deposit levels, although that raises the danger that they will penalise legitimate small savers. The 1986 Act introduced the two-year rule that forbids the distribution of cash bonuses to shareholding members of less than two years and to borrowers. Nevertheless, I recognise the real concerns expressed by the remaining societies that they are potentially faced with unending disruption and instability caused by annual challenges from the proponents of conversion.

The Government have already raised the threshold for turnout for those voting in favour of conversion to 50 per cent., but that does not address the problem of elections in which candidates can be nominated by just 50 members. Societies such as Nationwide and the Bradford and

[Mr. Whittingdale]

Bingley have asked for greater protection. I have sympathy with them, but, in attempting to find a solution, we have to be careful not to diminish the accountability of the board to the members.

Mutual societies were created for the benefit of small savers, and it is essential that their interests and rights are fully protected. Members have already shown that they are prepared to back the judgment of their board and to take a long-term view. I have no doubt that they are better placed than anyone else to decide the future of the societies they own.

10.50 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): First, I join hon. Members on both sides of the House in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing the debate, and in paying tribute to his excellent work as chairman of the all-party building societies group. He has pursued the interests of building societies with great vigour, and I have regular contact with him.

By and large, we have had a measured and sensible debate about an issue of great public interest. I take no lessons from anyone about mutuality: I am unique in the House, as the only mutual bank is in my constituency. Airdrie savings bank, which I joined at the age of seven, is the last remaining mutual bank. The silver savings bank that I was given at the age of seven still sits on my desk. It still has money in it, because they will not take it out for me. So I take no lectures about mutuality. Like many hon. Members from working-class backgrounds, I know that the shilling-a-week man was a lifeline for many poorer households, and I have a great affection for friendly societies.

It is inevitable that much of the debate has been about building societies, given the events of the past 24 hours and the fact that we are looking forward to the result of the ballot on the Nationwide building society. Let me pick up a point made by the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale). I do not have a crystal ball, so I do not know what will happen in respect of the Nationwide, but I emphasise that the decision will not be taken by Parliament or by the Government: it will be taken by the members of the society. That is the strength of mutuality. There is a very fine line between the interests of the members and the protection of the board.

The boards of building societies look after themselves rather well, and it is not out of line to allow the membership to challenge them. For example, board members of the Nationwide recently awarded themselves salary increases ranging from 26 per cent. to 49 per cent. Nor are they exactly on the minimum wage. The lowest salary is £250,000. Frankly, we must keep the issue in perspective. The boards want protection, but they must also respond to the anxieties of their membership.

Many hon. Members have suggested that the Government should intervene to protect societies from demutualisation. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) made an extremely enlightening speech. I hope that many have taken note of the activities of some members in pushing for demutualisation of building societies.

However, the Government can do only so much to protect building societies. Frankly, building societies themselves have some responsibility for making the case for mutuality—a point that I have made to them repeatedly. Last November, when I raised the turnout threshold to 50 per cent., I stressed that every building society board that has recommended against conversion has been successful. I hope that that is repeated tomorrow, but the building societies must make sure that they take on board the requirement to provide the maximum service to their membership.

Before the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) wandered off—it is a good job hon. Members do not have to stamp time cards—he claimed that the Government had been nobbled by the banks over the 50 per cent. threshold. That is absolute and arrant nonsense. One reason for taking the decision to move to a 50 per cent. threshold was to discourage carpetbaggers.

I could have gone further and raised the threshold to 75 per cent., but the average turnout in respect of the Nationwide and other conversions has been 75 per cent. On the most recent occasion, 97 per cent. of the Nationwide members who voted were against conversion. If the threshold were 75 per cent., 74 per cent. of members voted and they were all in favour of conversion, the society would not be able to convert. That is not democracy. I realise that we have to do what we can to make the case for mutuality, but we must not do it by destroying mutuality.

A number of hon. Members have referred to the number of backers that are required before there can be a challenge. Let us get that into perspective. It took Michael Hardern two years to get the 50 backers he needed for the Nationwide elections last year. The key element has to be selling the case for mutuality.

The 1997 Act was supported by Labour in opposition, because we recognised that building societies must be given the opportunity to provide an even better service to their members. It gave building societies more power, greater supervision and more accountability.

There must be a careful balance. Of course there are carpetbaggers and rather eccentric people seeking to be directors of building societies. Let me make it clear that it is a matter for the board to act if it considers that any member applying for election is not fit to do so.

If the chairman of a building society board considers that a nominated candidate does not have the appropriate qualities to be a member of the board, he is fully entitled to inform members of his views. It is then for members to decide who they want to trust with the safekeeping of their savings, and the direction that they want the society to take. If an inappropriate person is elected, the Building Societies Commission can consider whether such a person is fit and proper to be a director of a building society.

Building societies are fully entitled to take such measures as the legislation or their rules allow to restrict account opening and preserve services to bona fide members, but there are dangers in that. We spoke about social exclusion. The hon. Member for Twickenham suggested, as if it were a brand new idea, that the social exclusion unit should look at friendly societies, but it has been doing so since last May. The friendly societies and the concept of mutuality, enlarging the access to financial services for low income earners, will continue to be a critical part of Government policy. If we are to move people from welfare to work, we must give them access to financial services, as that is the ladder out of social exclusion and poverty.

Friendly societies are less well known than building societies, but they have a long and proud history. As I said, the shilling-a-week man continues to be important in the community that I represent. Friendly societies are regarded as social, friendly and honest. As the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) said, they are trusted. It is about relationships, and they were built on the principles of self-help and mutual support. They are important institutions, and the movement is healthy. Total funds are more than £10 billion, and membership is estimated at more than 5 million. I am encouraged by the enthusiasm shown by the friendly society movement to play a part in welfare reform.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): Given the massive mis-selling of pensions that there has been, will my hon. Friend consider whether some companies are fit to be trusted to deal in the upcoming individual savings accounts? Will she give a leg up to mutuals on that?

Mrs. Liddell: I have already made it clear that we shall examine the performance of companies, mutual or not, on pensions mis-selling when we consider ISAs and stakeholder pensions. My hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform is doing valuable work with the friendly society movement.

Credit unions are often the unsung heroes of the mutual sector. The Government are determined to give a new future to credit unions and co-operatives. They are at the heart of the third way—they are rooted in our history, but they hold the future for many people.

I commend the debate and look forward to the mutual sector increasing in strength. The Government will do everything that we can to ensure that.

Sellafield and Dounreay (Discharges)

11 am

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth): I hope that hon. Members will bear with me this morning. I have a lot to get through and others will want to contribute to the debate.

Today's debate is opportune, because today and tomorrow Ospar—the Oslo and Paris convention on the protection of the North sea and the north-east Atlantic—is meeting in Sintra, Portugal. Ministers from 16 member countries will be meeting to hammer out solutions on oil rig disposal, chemical pollution in the sea and radioactive discharges into the marine environment.

The Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment are representing the UK in Portugal. They have an awkward task. All the Nordic countries oppose the UK's stance on radioactive discharges into the marine environment. The Irish Government consider such discharges to be objectionable and unacceptable. During a visit to Downing street a few weeks ago, the Norwegian Prime Minister registered his protest. Nobody disputes the fact that there is international concern.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The Norwegians are also concerned about carbon in the atmosphere. The other side of the coin is more coal burning and fossil-fuel-related power stations.

Ms Cunningham: I understand the hon. Gentleman's long-term interest in the issue, but he cannot argue that the alternative to discharging radioactive waste into the marine environment is necessarily coal burning. Those two do not go together.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): When she replies, perhaps the Minister will clarify what processes require radioactive discharge into the marine environment. It may not be necessary to discharge into the marine environment to achieve the goals of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell).

Ms Cunningham: There are two issues. The hon. Member for Linlithgow is talking about the alternatives to nuclear energy, but I am talking about the separate—although in my view related—issue of discharges that result from reprocessing waste.

We are polluting the seas of other countries and our seas with substances whose radioactivity will last for hundreds of thousands of years. Technetium-99 is one such substance. I am not a physics expert, so my comments on the issue have been taken from more technical documents. Technetium-99 is a radio-isotope with a half-life of 213,000 years. That means that it will take 213,000 years for the radioactivity to reduce to half its current level, and another 213,000 years for a further reduction to half that level. That carries on ad infinitum. We have to be sure of ourselves before we start pumping something seemingly indestructible into the environment, but we are not sure about technetium-99. The Government are allowing Sellafield to pump it daily into the sea.

A Norwegian radiation protection authority report published in February this year says that there are many uncertainties about technetium-99 and that further investigation is needed before a full dose assessment can

[Ms Cunningham]

be implemented, yet the Government see fit to allow its dumping into the sea because no one has yet proved it to be harmful.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): How does the hon. Lady measure the significance of such discharges against the natural background radiation in the environment?

Ms Cunningham: There is a debate about the existing level of background radiation and it has been argued that some of what is pumped into the marine environment does not exceed the levels of background radiation. I shall explain my argument against that point later.

We know that technetium bioaccumulates in shellfish, particularly lobsters, and in seaweed. It has been found in lobsters around Sellafield in concentrations 42 times the European intervention level. Intervention levels are set out for use after a nuclear emergency such as that at Chernobyl.

Samples taken by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in Dumfries and Galloway show that the currents wash the liquid waste on to the shores of south-west Scotland, putting levels of technetium in seaweed at five times the European intervention level. The levels have trebled in the past 12 months. The technetium washes west towards Ireland and northwards along the west coast of Scotland. It reaches the North sea within nine months and continues towards Scandinavia, where levels of the radio-isotope have been found to have increased fifteenfold since 1993.

Having looked at the figures from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, from SEPA and from Greenpeace, I am deeply concerned not just about the current levels of radioactivity in shellfish and seaweed, but about monitoring. The data appear to be inadequate and inconsistent, showing lobsters here and seaweed there, making comparisons between different years and different places difficult to calculate. I do not know whether that inconsistency in monitoring is deliberate to ensure that nobody is certain what is happening. Perhaps SEPA is not being given enough financial resources to do its part of the job properly and to carry out the thorough programmes of monitoring that should take place consistently from year to year.

Although Greenpeace has done a marvellous job of sampling and bringing the issue to the fore, its efforts have focused almost entirely on Sellafield. Dounreay also discharges waste into the sea. The results of that pollution are not documented to anything like the same extent, even though they are clearly felt in Scandinavia.

I have not yet mentioned the central issue of authorisation. Radioactive liquid would not pollute our seas without the authorisations of the environment agencies, sanctioned by central Government. The authorisations have been very generous, allowing reprocessing plants to pump out the by-products of their processes without fear of exceeding official limits. At Sellafield, the limit for technetium-99 used to be 10 terabecquerels per year. In 1994, the enhanced actinide removal plant—EARP—was opened at Sellafield. EARP separates quantities of certain radioactive substances, including plutonium, from the material that arises from the thermal oxide reprocessing plant—THORP—but it does not separate technetium-99. Despite that, the arrival of EARP was hailed as the answer to the problem of dangerous waste and anything that had been through it was deemed to be safe to dump in the sea.

In 1994, the Environment Agency revised the authorisation level from the original level of 10 terabecquerels to a massive 200 terabecquerels. I return to the issue raised by the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). The massive rise has opened the floodgates—the pun is not intended—allowing the dumping of years of accumulated technetium. Only 6 terabecquerels of technetium were discharged from Sellafield in 1993, but an astonishing 506 terabecquerels were discharged between 1993 and 1997.

It is therefore not surprising that radioactivity found in the marine environment soared in 1994, and has been rising progressively ever since. The Environment Agency is supposedly considering a reduction of the authorisation level to 90 terabecquerels, but I ask hon. Members not to be fooled by that and to remember that, only five years ago, the level was 10 terabecquerels. Since the Ospar convention originally set its objectives in 1992, the level has increased massively.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): The hon. Lady should also take into account the fact that the Environment Agency has told British Nuclear Fuels plc that it must investigate the matter and come up with abatement technology to take technetium-99 out of the system by 2000.

Ms Cunningham: I thank the Minister for that; I was going to raise it later.

Another concern, which we should not ignore and which has also been voiced by the Nordic Council of Ministers, among others, is that gaseous emissions will be allowed to increase because liquid ones have decreased. We should put talk of reductions into context and remind ourselves yet again of the time that technetium takes to decay. The speed with which we pipe it into the sea is almost immaterial.

At Dounreay, there is little technetium discharge, but a vast number of different radioactive materials are poured out, each with its own limit. Those authorisation levels have long been extremely high, allowing the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority to discharge as much as it likes without any possibility of transgressing them. It is even in a position to claim, after leaks and accidents, that it has not exceeded authorised levels, which is very useful to it. Authorisation levels never seem to be exceeded; they just seem to be consistently increased.

SEPA recently conducted a consultation process as part of a review into authorisation levels for Dounreay. The situation has obviously changed since the Secretary of State for Scotland's announcement in June that the plant would be decommissioned. I would appreciate the Minister's advice on whether SEPA's consultation will be reopened in the light of the plant's new circumstances. I hope that it will, because the methods used to calculate discharge limits for Dounreay are absurd. SEPA recently accepted that the limits should more closely reflect the so-called need to discharge, but the criteria for setting them remains astonishingly unprescriptive.

SEPA's proposals appear to be based on the maximum design throughput of all the plants on site and on the fact that all plants would operate simultaneously. It further allowed an additional operating margin over the sum of the plants' design capacity, which ensured that whatever Dounreay could conceivably discharge would be within the set limits. That does not demonstrate, according to the Minister of the Environment, the Government's desire

"to make progress on the question of reducing discharge to the marine environment",

or the need for

"much tougher rules for sharply reducing discharges to sea of radioactive and hazardous waste".

We are allowing an environmental problem to pile up in our seas with no way of removing it. With every discharge, we are increasing the problem not only for future generations but for many people now. We are endangering the livelihoods of those in the marine economy and we are becoming a target for international protest. The United Kingdom, even under the new Government, is still proving to be the dirty man of Europe.

I was interested to note reports in *The Scotsman* on Friday that UKAEA has commissioned the Scottish universities research and reactor centre to conduct an aerial survey of the area around Dounreay with the specific purpose of identifying radiation hot spots. SEPA was apparently unimpressed with the UKAEA's earlier reports on off-site contamination and pressed it to do more. I am not surprised; there is already a fishing exclusion zone in the area around Dounreay as a combined result of radioactive discharges and the on-going leakage of solid fragments of waste on to the shore and into the sea. I shall resist the temptation to rehearse the list of Dounreay's failings, which some hon. Members will have heard me list before. I have made my point in previous debates.

Somebody else who has made a point on the issue is the Deputy Prime Minister. I understand that there are some very interesting pictures of him from some years ago wearing a frogsuit outside Downing street in protest against the dumping of nuclear waste from ships at sea.

At last summer's Labour party conference, the party's national executive endorsed a resolution, which was adopted by the conference, calling for an independent review of nuclear waste and reprocessing policy. The Department of Trade and Industry has since denied that any such inquiry will take place—according to last month's Environmental Data Services report. At the same time, the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry has told us:

"the Deputy Prime Minister . . . is considering the future of reprocessing."—[*Official Report*, 8 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 714.]

I hope that the position on any review or future consideration will be clarified. Apparently the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has also denied to Environmental Data Services that the Deputy Prime Minister is considering any such thing. Will the Minister enlighten us on that issue today? Many of us would like to know whether there will be an independent review of reprocessing and waste disposal.

The Government have displayed great confusion over nuclear issues in recent months. Sometimes, one gets the feeling that they are kept in the dark by nuclear operators just as much as the rest of us. The nuclear installations inspectorate report was suppressed—or kept from Ministers—and, more recently, the Prime Minister scoffed at the idea of uranium going missing on site at Dounreay.

Although I do not want to cast doubt on the Prime Minister's veracity when standing at the Dispatch Box, a UKAEA scientist later claimed that the material was missing. Reports over the weekend add credence to the story. People at Dounreay claim that they have managed to find the missing uranium, which, according to other reports, was not missing. Whether it was missing depends on who tells the story. The mystery deepens; perhaps it is extending to the UK's approach to this week's meeting in Sintra.

Angela Eagle: To reinforce the message given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box, the material unaccounted for is thought to have come about because of technical measurement errors in reprocessing. We have absolutely no evidence of material going missing. The matter is simply one of technical measurement concerning 30-year-old data.

Ms Cunningham: I appreciate the Minister's stance, which has been stated before. Unfortunately, subsequent reports have said that there were no accounting errors and that, in fact, there were losses—just as one knows when one loses one's keys in the living room that they are there somewhere, but one just does not know where. There is a mystery surrounding the issue.

Ministers have been cautious about making any commitments; even the ministerial briefing is ambiguous. It says:

"We want to agree a strategy for radioactive substances that is demanding but achievable."

I am encouraged by the sentiment of that comment, but concerned that Ministers have not seen fit to make an explicitly positive statement in advance of the Ospar meeting. I heard an interview with the Deputy Prime this morning on Radio 4, after which, I must confess, I was none the wiser about the exact UK Government approach to the discussions.

There is a backlog of liquid waste at Sellafield. I do not deny that that is a problem, but let us be clear: reprocessing creates solid, liquid and gaseous waste. The longer we continue to reprocess, the bigger the problem we will have. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Dalyell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Cunningham: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis).

Mr. Dafis: My specific concern is, of course, with the possible effects of the discharge of radioactive material from Sellafield into the Irish sea, along the western coast of Wales. Dr. Chris Busby, who has done a great deal of work on low-level radiation, has recently suggested that the incidence of leukaemia among children along the western coast of Wales is about five times higher than that in inland

[Mr. Dafis]

Wales, along the border with England. Surely that is prima facie evidence of a link between radioactive contamination and health.

Ms Cunningham: There has long been discussion about what, for want of a better phrase, I shall call cancer hot spots, near areas of contamination.

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Ms Cunningham: I can see that the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, but this will be the last intervention. I must press on.

Mr. Dalyell: When the hon. Lady was talking about the Deputy Prime Minister, she said that she was "none the wiser". May I gently ask her whether she has been to Dounreay or Sellafield? When I was a new Member of Parliament, I would not have dreamed of opening my mouth unless I had been to such places and heard what the people there had to say. In those days, we were frequently invited by Sir William Penney to go to such places. Has the hon. Lady been to them?

Ms Cunningham: No, I have not. It is an interesting concept to suggest that one is never expected to say anything in this place without having physical hands-on experience of the issue. If that were the case, very little would be debated in the House. Two or three members of the Scottish National party parliamentary group have been to Dounreay, as have SNP Members of the European Parliament. I am perfectly capable of reading the same information that every other Member of the House reads.

I find the hon. Gentleman's suggestion intriguing, and will watch with great interest the next debate in the House on foreign affairs or defence; no doubt it will be confined to those who have been to the countries in question, flown the aeroplanes, or been in the ships. I am afraid that I do not take what the hon. Gentleman said as a valid criticism.

If we stopped reprocessing, there would be a smaller quantity of waste to deal with in the longer term. That includes the liquid waste currently being discharged into the sea. With Dounreay we are already halfway there; commercial reprocessing contracts will no longer be taken on, although we have not been told how many still exist.

Decommissioning is under way, but the Government have been led to believe that

"reprocessing is a necessary part of the decommissioning process".

In my view, and in that of many environmentalists, that is not true. The existing stockpiles of spent fuel at Dounreay should be stored above ground where they can be monitored, and retrieved if necessary. If we cease the reprocessing cycle straight away, the production of further unnecessary waste and discharges will be avoided.

The same should apply to THORP, which is apparently shut at the moment, as the result of a leak. As I understand it, no United Kingdom reprocessing plant is in working order at this stage. I am happy in the knowledge that no reprocessing is taking place in Britain today, but I am concerned that the plants that are unfit today will be open again to carry on polluting and leaking tomorrow.

I have said many times, and I say again, that reprocessing should stop. It is a short-sighted practice which has become its own self-perpetuating problem. In exchanges over Dounreay I have argued that the false prospect of financial gain has led to an excessively casual attitude towards nuclear materials, and in a separate debate on plutonium earlier this year I argued that reprocessing leads unavoidably to global proliferation of weapons-grade material.

Today, I am arguing that reprocessing causes unnecessary and irreparable environmental pollution. All that points to a moratorium on reprocessing in the United Kingdom. The other options are, if not ideal, infinitely more sensible and easier for future generations to put right. On-site, above-ground storage, as close as possible to the point of origin, is by far the most environmentally friendly way to deal with the unwanted side products of nuclear power generation.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian) *rose—*

Ms Cunningham: I see the hon. Gentleman leaping to his feet, but I said that I would not take any more interventions. Perhaps I can guess what he wants to say. The SNP has long opposed the idea of Scottish exports of nuclear waste to other countries. *[Interruption.]* If hon. Members care to look at the record, they will discover, to use just one example, that, when the suggestion to store on site at Torness was made, the SNP supported the proposal, although it was refused in the end.

I concede that the decommissioning process necessarily involves by-products, and it is a matter for the experts whether such quantities should be discharged; that would be a subject for serious further discussion. Tough guidelines should be employed, even then, to ensure that no easy option is provided, whatever the context.

The development of abatement technology is another option, which the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), has already raised. That would involve further developing methods for separating out dangerous substances from liquid waste. The technology to remove technetium-99 does not currently exist, and, to give the Department of Trade and Industry its due, it has asked BNFL to get to work immediately on developing such a process.

However, the United Kingdom relies on the maxim of BATNEEC—a rather clumsy acronym for "best available technology not entailing excessive cost"—so my concern is whether BNFL will develop abatement technology, or claim that it is too expensive.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Cunningham *indicated assent.*

Hon. Members: Oh.

Mr. Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for her courtesy. Would she be interested to know that the Environment Agency, in its draft authorisation for Sellafield, says:

"Should the work to develop abatement technology show that it is not possible at a reasonable cost . . . then the discharge limit for Tc-99 will be reviewed and if necessary increased"?

Does that not increase my hon. Friend's worries?

Ms Cunningham: That goes back to the issues already raised in the debate about the fluctuating authorisation levels, which do not appear to relate to the real environmental concerns.

Ospar begins today, and various options are under consideration, each proposing a different degree of commitment. There is talk of gradually reducing discharges, with the ultimate aim of reaching background exposures. Alternative 2, drafted by the Governments of Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Ireland, requires Governments to

"continuously reduce discharges, emissions and losses of radioactive substances, with the ultimate aim of concentrations in the environment near background values for naturally occurring radioactive substances and close to zero for artificial radioactive substances".

Norway has also proposed text for the Sintra ministerial statement to make that even more explicit. It wants Ospar to say:

"we recognise that reprocessing is the major source of radionuclide discharges to the maritime area . ... we will make every endeavour to reach the target of cessation of such discharges as quickly as possible".

The key phrase to bear in mind is:

"close to zero for artificial radioactive substances".

The Minister for the Environment has hinted that he is prepared to consider that option, and I hope that he does. I understand that France, the other nation in Ospar with reprocessing facilities, has decided to support it, albeit with a caveat of its own. However, our Minister has been quoted as saying:

"I don't accept that there is a distinction or contradiction between what we are trying to achieve at Ospar and the current discharge application being made in regard to Sellafield."

That goes against everything that I have said. Sellafield authorisations, even if they are decreased to the level proposed by the Environment Agency—if, indeed, at the end of the day the agency proposes a decrease—will still be nine times higher than they were six years ago when Ospar originally formed its objectives.

Does the Minister really want us to be seen yet again as the dinosaur at Ospar, the dirty man of Europe? I hope not. It is the United Kingdom's responsibility to behave like a good neighbour, and to recognise when irresponsible actions taken on its own shores have an impact on shores overseas.

I remind hon. Members of some of the serious words of protest that the Government have received from overseas. In February, the Nordic Council of Ministers wrote that its members were

"concerned about further releases of radioactive substances to the marine environment and urge the Government of the United Kingdom to stop discharges of Technetium-99".

The Irish Government wrote of

"the health and environmental threat associated with the UK nuclear installations",

and said that they were

"vehemently opposed to the continuation of nuclear operations at Sellafield and to any expansion of the nuclear industry in Britain",

and found discharges into the Irish sea

"objectionable and unacceptable".

Reprocessing entails the discharge of what many people and Governments regard as repugnant radioactive substances into our seas and on to our shores and those of our neighbours. It is a growing environmental problem which should be stopped now. It is creating increasing international friction. Radioactive discharges into the marine environment need to be tackled with immediate action and an immediate reduction to a figure as close to zero as the decommissioning process will allow.

The Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment, who have a history of sympathy for that cause, now have the ideal opportunity to solve the problem. Ospar provides an international forum at which a binding commitment can be made which will ease domestic concern and reduce international pressure. The future can be made safer and we can employ our workers not in polluting the environment but in cleaning it up. I look forward to hearing the Minister's views.

11.30 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I have had a very courteous letter from the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), which he has also sent to the Minister, saying that he cannot be here because of his long-standing commitment to speak at an award ceremony of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. The right hon. Gentleman said:

"If I had been present, I would have wished to raise the delay in completing the NRPB survey at Dounreay commissioned by SEPA. I hope you might find it possible to give an indication as to when the findings of the NRPB assessment will be available."

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will answer that question.

May I ask two direct factual questions of the Minister, who is strongly supported by officials? The hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) said that, in lobsters, the level of technetium-99 was 42 times the European intervention level and that, in seaweed, it was five times the European intervention level. Do my hon. Friend's expert advisers concur with those figures?

In recent years, the discharges to the marine environment from Dounreay have been reduced progressively. The effect of those discharges to the group in Caithness that is most exposed to discharges from Dounreay—I am referring to the so-called critical group—is now less than 1 per cent. of the dose that the group receives from the natural background. Do the Government agree with that statement? Do they agree that the levels of discharges to the sea are a small fraction—currently less than 10 per cent.—of the discharge authorisation and that Dounreay has not exceeded its authorisation in the past 20 years? In truth, there have been "unplanned" discharges as recently as September 1996, due to the dissolver leak, but those have not led to discharge levels above authorisation. Will the Minister confirm in her reply that there have not been discharges above authorisation?

New plant for treating liquid effluent is being installed. That will further reduce the levels of radioactivity discharged from Dounreay. Do the Government think that that is proceeding as quickly as it should?

[Mr. Tam Dalyell]

There are radioactive particles in the marine environment as a result of historic activities in the 1960s at Dounreay. It has been confirmed that those particles have not been released as a result of present activities on the site. The likelihood of a member of the public coming into contact with one of those particles is judged by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority to be extremely remote, but we have to await the outcome of an independent assessment commissioned by the National Radiological Protection Board. That is the assessment about which the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, who represents Dounreay, is concerned.

On Sellafield, are the Government satisfied with the level of activity undertaken by BNFL to reduce discharges? I have been to Sellafield on several occasions, sometimes in the company of the Member of Parliament who represents Sellafield, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my squash partner and friend of many years, and I know it well.

Through an investment programme of £750 million at Sellafield, BNFL has reduced the discharges of principal radionuclides to the Irish sea to about 1 per cent. of peak levels in the 1970s. Do the Minister's advisers accept that statement? The Environment Agency is currently completing its response, after public consultation, to an application by BNFL to vary its discharge authorisations to achieve a further net reduction in the permitted level of discharges to the Irish sea. Are the Government satisfied with BNFL's efforts in that respect?

Is it not a fact that discharges cannot be completely stopped for the foreseeable future because, as my previous remarks demonstrate, most of them relate to historic clean-up or Magnox reprocessing? Ceasing Magnox reprocessing would force the early closure of the Magnox stations, which, assuming the electricity was replaced by gas-fired power, would lead to an extra 16 million tonnes of CO_2 being emitted in the UK each year. The Government must reduce discharges of CO_2 by 35 million tonnes by 2010 to meet their commitment to a 20 per cent. reduction. How, without taking advantage of Sellafield and Dounreay, can we even attempt to fulfil the commitment that the Government have rightly made to reduce CO_2 in the atmosphere?

I have another question concerning a letter that I wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 June, asking whether the Scottish universities' research was correct in suggesting that Sellafield has increased concentrations of carbon-14 in the north-east Irish sea to up to 35 times the normal background level. My question was prompted by a statement in the *New Scientist* of 6 June, which aroused my curiosity. On 15 July, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) courteously replied:

"I understand that neither the Environment Agency nor MAFF can confirm the figures quoted in New Scientist, that carbon-14 in sea water near Sellafield is 35 times the background level. However, MAFF routinely check the carbon-14 concentration in seafood at the end of the Sellafield discharge pipe, where levels are likely to be highest and have measured levels up to eight times the background level. The radiation exposure of the most exposed members of the public (the critical group) from carbon-14 is only four microSieverts per annum, which is 0.4 per cent. of the international dose limit of 1,000 microSieverts per annum."

Surely one can conclude from that letter that there is no cause for alarm.

The Minister's letter continued:

"Both aerial and liquid discharges of radioactivity from Sellafield are limited by certificates of authorisation under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993, granted by the Environment Agency. The discharges of carbon-14 to sea via the marine pipeline increased from 1994 due to a planned plant modification that ensures the carbon-14 is discharged to sea and not to the atmosphere so as to reduce the overall impact of this radionuclide. The impact on the critical group is less for sea discharges than for an equivalent aerial discharge. The Environment Agency keeps the discharge authorisations under review."

Would I be right in thinking that the Government have total confidence in the Environment Agency and in its keeping that under review, and that, again, there is no cause for alarm?

The Minister finally says:

"Recent events at Dounreay and THORP demonstrate the Government's commitment to strong regulation of the nuclear industry to ensure the safety of the workforce and the public at large."

One of the most wonderful days that I have ever had in my public life was on an official visit to THORP, a marvellous technical performance by British engineering, which is one of the wonders of the modern world. I am an unapologetic champion of THORP as a great achievement of British engineering, and something that is able to do a great deal of good. I say "a great deal of good" for the reason that I interrupted the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham)—that, without nuclear power, heaven knows how we shall achieve any ability to control the nasty things of all sorts that are being put into the atmosphere.

Sir Robert Smith: Pursuing that argument, does the Member really believe that THORP is crucial to having a nuclear industry?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that all Members are honourable Members.

Sir Robert Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that, without THORP, there could not be a nuclear industry?

Mr. Dalyell: There could be a nuclear industry, but it would not be anything like as effective a nuclear industry.

The Minister says:

"At THORP the plant was shut down following leakage from pipework within a contained cell."

But she adds:

"In neither incident was there an adverse radiological impact to the workforce or the general public. HSE will not permit either plant to reopen until it is satisfied that they can be restarted safely."

I use this opportunity to ask the Minister about the latest advice from the Health and Safety Executive on the matter because, the sooner THORP reopens, the better for a lot of us.

Finally, on a personal note, as a Scottish Member of Parliament, I am greatly alarmed by the effect of what is happening on the morale of the work force at Dounreay. Neville Chamberlain and others really brought it home to me that, unless we keep up the morale of the work force and the challenge and seriousness of the tasks that they are asked to perform, there could be real risks, which there

have not been in the past. In all this, do the Government have a clear strategy for many years to keep up the morale of those at Dounreay who have served society, the community and the world very well?

11.43 am

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The last point made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) is valid. The current openness about incidents that happened, sometimes very much in the past and at a different stage of technical understanding and knowledge, makes them newsworthy. Those incidents of the past—it is a matter of debate whether they are the sins of the past—are then visited on the current work force. It is important to recognise that the work force is composed of professional people doing a professional job.

There is a debate within society about whether it wants that job to continue, along with the question of what society wants to take place at that plant, but we should recognise the professionalism of the work force. There is the danger of it being labelled with the name of the place at which it works. There was much excitement last week, and it seems that, if one can link two famous things such as Brent Spar and Dounreay, it is even more exciting. The environmental debate can suffer if we try too hard to link everything that sounds dangerous or has a history of being dangerous.

As the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) made clear, the debate is timely, and I congratulate her on obtaining it. It is disappointing that the Government are negotiating today and tomorrow at the international conference on the Ospar convention despite our not having debated in the House what we would like to see come out of that convention. Unless the Minister goes immediately from the debate to the telephone, this debate may not have much influence.

We had some idea from the radio this morning of the Deputy Prime Minister's stance, and some idea of the Government's stance on Friday from *Hansard* when, in a written answer on radioactive substances, we were told that they wanted to work with industry. It said:

> "To ensure that we are able to see and avoid problems related to radioactive discharges in future, we shall be asking nuclear operators to prepare forward looking strategies for the next twenty years."—[*Official Report*, 17 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. *326*.]

Angela Eagle: Some of the increased discharges that have been experienced in this decade have been caused by decisions made in previous decades. The idea of the forward plans is that such matters should be taken into account, rather than there being a lag between a decision about how to deal with particular waste and the realisation that it requires greater dispersal a year later.

Sir Robert Smith: I think that I understand the Minister's point about the need to plan for the future. The Government recognise that it would be preferable not to discharge radioactive substances. Therefore, it is important for the Government to say why we should be doing so now, and why they want to carry on doing it at the moment.

An important part of the Minister's reply should be the setting out of the Government's attitude towards reprocessing—whether they still see the necessity for it and whether they are reviewing it, as the Labour party seems to want them to do. The economics of the industry and the driving forces behind reprocessing when it first started have now changed. The availability of fuel has changed and the need for plutonium has changed. We have debated plutonium and the worry about creating a plutonium culture when we do not need plutonium. There is also the worry that we allow such discharges because we want to continue reprocessing. We are importing waste from other countries, but are we certain that we can return it? It would be pointless to pollute our seas and end up as a nuclear dustbin for the rest of the world. Clearly, as in the Italian case, there is a danger that such waste will not be returned.

With the process in abeyance, if there are economic uncertainties and occasional technical uncertainties, which reduce capacity, the danger is that we shall not be able to carry out the contracts in the way that was originally intended by returning the high-level waste. In addition, because we cannot dispose of the low-level and medium waste, the argument behind the original reprocessing set-up seems to be falling apart. It would be reassuring to hear that the Government intend to review that. We have reached the point where the uncertainties are becoming greater and the foundations are looking rocky. The Government should ensure that their strategy fits the needs of the industry and the country at the present time.

On the radio, the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned background levels, but background levels of man-made substances are, obviously, zero—plutonium, for example, does not naturally occur, so its background level is zero. Will the Minister clarify what the Government mean by background levels and what kind of radiation emissions they are talking about?

I note that not too many hon. Members want to speak, so the Minister should have enough time to respond, which is crucial. In the debate on plutonium, we did not leave the Minister enough time to give a reply on which hon. Members could intervene. I hope that she will be able to deal with a wide range of issues, questions and facts.

I urge the Minister to say what the Government's attitude is to reprocessing and to a review of reprocessing. Why do the Government believe that it is necessary to continue discharging radioactive waste into the marine environment? I hope that we shall hear that, ultimately, they are committed to protecting the environment from man's activities, so that this generation, which benefits from cheap electricity, does not leave to future generations a problem from which they receive no benefit but with which they have to deal.

11.50 am

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): I have campaigned about pollution in the Irish sea for the past 10 years. The two main towns in my constituency—Rhyl and Prestatyn—are traditional seaside resort towns that depend on tourism for their prosperity. They expanded as tourist towns because of the clean seas and beaches, so any marine pollution threatens their viability and that of dozens of others on the Irish sea.

Radioactive pollution must be viewed in the context of the many other forms of pollution that affect the Irish sea, which is relatively enclosed. Industries that pollute the sea either deny that the problem exists in their industry or minimise the effects. Sewage sludge—human waste

[Mr. Chris Ruane]

mixed with heavy metals—has been dumped in Liverpool bay for 10 years at a rate of 90,000 tonnes per year. Indeed, dumping came to an end only this month—under a Labour Government, I am proud to announce. The Irish sea has for decades also been used as a huge chemical toilet by the water companies. They believed that long outfall pipes in the sea were the answer to sewage pollution, but—as has been the case in Blackpool—all that happened was that the sewage took longer to reach the beaches.

The main rivers that run into the Irish sea—especially those with industrial hinterlands, such as the Mersey and the Dee—have caused much pollution. In 1992, there were nearly 900 industrial spillages into the Irish sea from the Mersey. The dumping of munitions and chemical weapons since the end of the first world war has led to further pollution—flatfish caught in the Irish sea have 10 times the permitted level of arsenic. The rivers running into the Irish sea that have a rural hinterland have deposited hundreds of thousands of tonnes of fertilisers, leading to the worst cases of algae blooms in Europe.

Oil exploration and extraction have also contributed to the pollution of the Irish sea. Indeed, only four weeks ago, there was a major spillage of 47 tonnes from the Douglas field, for which Broken Hill Proprietary claimed responsibility. The spillage affected both my constituency and its neighbour, Clwyd, West—5 tonnes of it ended up on the shores of Rhyl, Prestatyn, Pensarn and Abergele.

The Irish sea is a busy shipping area. Many of the ships that visit the ports illegally flush out their tanks into the sea, and other ships, such as the Sea Empress, run aground—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but the debate is about radioactive discharges into the marine environment from Sellafield—he must make his remarks fit in with that subject.

Mr. Ruane: I come finally to the pollutant that is being discussed—radiation, specifically radiation leaks from Sellafield. In 1991, my constituency experienced some of the worst storms of the century. Parts of it, and of the neighbouring constituency of Clwyd, West, were under five feet of water. The crashing waves disturbed the sandy sediment on the beaches. HTV commissioned research that found radiation levels way above the average.

The Irish sea has been described as one of the most radioactive seas in the world. The Government made excellent headway in the reduction of radioactive pollution by announcing last September a complete ban on the dumping of radioactive waste, which was in stark contrast to the dilute-and-disperse policy of the previous Government.

I realise that reducing to zero radioactive discharges into the marine environment will not be easy. There has been a £7 billion investment in Sellafield, the plant has £12 billion of orders and tens of thousands of jobs are at stake. However, I urge the Minister to consider seriously the reduction to zero of radioactive pollution at Sellafield. I urge her to consider radioactive pollution in the wider context of the overall pollution of the Irish sea from the many sources that I have mentioned, and to take account of the negative effects of radioactive discharge on the economy, especially on tourism and fishing. The effects of radioactive discharges on the marine environment could be profound, and could last for hundreds of thousands of years.

11.56 am

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) on obtaining this debate, to which I want to make a brief contribution. I am concerned about the discharges from the Sellafield plant in Cumbria. The longest coastline adjacent to Sellafield—apart from that of Cumbria itself—is on the Solway firth in my constituency. For some years, there has been great concern about the increase in radionuclides in the firth and on the beaches. As my hon. Friend said, particular concern has been expressed about the levels of technetium-99 in the environment, which are largely a result of the processing that began not so long ago of the waste from the Magnox programme. Although discharges are now falling from their historically high levels, we need to ask whether current or future levels are, or will be, satisfactory—indeed, we need to ask whether there is such a thing as a satisfactory level.

Various claims have been made about the level of radioactive concentrations in seafood and various kinds of seaweed. Concentrations are high not only near the end of the Sellafield discharge pipe—where British Nuclear Fuels says one would expect them to be high—but all along the Solway coast and as far round as Cape Wrath in the north of Scotland, where pollution in seafood and seaweed is increasing.

According to Scottish Environment Protection Agency surveys, radioactivity in lobsters caught on the north Solway coast increased from 390 bq/kg in 1994 to 1,700 bq/kg two years later. In winkles from Southerness—a village in my constituency—levels increased from 200 bq/kg to 730 bq/kg over the same period. At Port William in the Machars in my constituency, the level in seaweed has increased from 350 bq/kg to 2600 bq/kg over that period. At Cape Wrath in the north of Scotland, the level in seaweed has increased from 22 bq/kg to 290 bq/kg. We have a major problem of increasing cumulative levels.

BNFL says that eating seven or eight lobsters of the sort found in my constituency gives radioactivity equivalent to eating one Brazil nut. I must admit that I have never eaten a Brazil nut, despite the world cup, but the real point is the cumulative and long-lasting effect of the build-up of such concentrations of radioactivity and the effect that that will have on future generations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth pointed out, technetium-99 has a half-life of 213,000 years, so it builds up. The result is that we can expect the increase in pollution in sea foods and seaweeds to continue until an unacceptable level is reached.

Reference has also been made to leukaemia clusters. Although the number of cases is too small to permit any definite conclusion as to whether there is a noticeable effect on the coast of Wales, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) pointed out, there is genuine concern among people in those areas that their environment and health are being affected. The Environment Agency plans to allow BNFL to increase its discharges of various radioactive gases, including iodine-129, carbon-14 and ruthenium-106.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) referred to discharges of carbon-14, but the significant feature of carbon-14 is that it has a half-life of 16 million years, so although discharges might not yet have built up to a significant level, the problem is cumulative and it will prove to be long lasting. The problem will certainly be around long after most of us have left the Chamber.

We have to take into account the international perspective. Some hon. Members regard people involved in the anti-nuclear movement as a bunch of cranks, but I do not think that we can put the Irish Government, the Norwegian Government or the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations into that category. They are all responsible bodies with which we have cordial relations, and we have to take seriously their views on the need to eliminate such discharges.

Ideally, we should not discharge radionuclides into the atmosphere or the environment. However there is a danger that even the low-level discharges that BNFL, SEPA and the Environment Agency seek will not be achieved because of cost considerations. There is a danger inherent in the "best available technology not entailing excessive cost" principle that, because of the cost, we shall not even achieve the far from ideal levels that are being talked about.

Many of my constituents have a long and honourable record of opposition to nuclear pollution, going back to the campaign against nuclear dumping in Mullwharcher in the 1970s, which was led by one of my predecessors, Mr. George Thompson. They are still concerned about health and the environment, and about the potential effect on tourism, to which the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) referred. They have no desire to be the victims of nuclear dumping by stealth from Sellafield.

12.3 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I shall endeavour to be brief, first, so that the Minister can reply adequately to the debate and, secondly, because I do not count myself one of the House's experts on this subject.

It was interesting to note how the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham) was stung by the intervention from the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) about whether she had ever visited Dounreay. I have visited neither Dounreay nor Sellafield, but I have visited the Magnox power station at Bradwell in Essex, which is adjacent to my constituency and in which I take a close interest.

I must admit that I have been hugely impressed by the attention paid to safety there and to ensuring that nuclear emissions are tightly controlled. The only incident that alarmed local residents occurred when one of the boilers overheated and the station had to let off a lot of steam, but no nuclear discharge was involved. The most common sort of nuclear alert is one caused by visitors wearing old-fashioned luminous watches. The staff advise visitors to remove them and to stop wearing them, because they pose a far higher risk to personal health than any nuclear power station.

I know the west coast of Scotland well. There are far worse environmental hazards there than the low levels of nuclear discharge that we are discussing today. For example, the release of mink has had a devastating effect on local bird life, which raises questions about biodiversity. Acid rain caused by coal-fired power stations has also had a significant effect on Scotland's west coast.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Surely the hon. Gentleman is not arguing that the existence of other problems means that we should not tackle this problem?

Mr. Jenkin: No, I am not saying that; it is entirely in character that the hon. Gentleman should try to imply that I am. I am saying merely that the issues should be kept in proportion. The hon. Member for Linlithgow made a good fist of explaining how the emissions are hugely reduced, which is hardly the impression given by the hon. Member for Perth. We should be interested in reducing overall pollution, not only one sort of pollution. To do so, we must make uncomfortable and difficult choices, because the problem does not lend itself to the sort of single-issue fanaticism that the nuclear industry has always attracted.

I was most interested in the assertion by the hon. Member for Perth that we could reduce nuclear waste by stopping nuclear reprocessing. That flies in the face of the advice from BNFL, which argues that, on the contrary, reprocessing reduces overall waste and especially high-level waste. The hon. Lady neatly claimed to support alternative means of disposal, but all the advice so far assessed by Governments of whatever party shows that alternative forms of storage are not as efficient a way of dealing with nuclear waste as reprocessing.

The important considerations in this debate are responsibility and openness. Our prime concern should be the environment, and not only one kind of pollution, radioactive discharges; for example, we should also be concerned about CO_2 emissions. On the question of coping with radioactive materials that originate in different parts of the world, it is interesting to note how internationalist many environmentalists are when it suits them but, when BNFL provides a service to help the world to deal with the problem of nuclear waste, they suddenly complain that this country is being turned into a nuclear dustbin. That is not a consistent view.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman wishes to dismiss my views and fears; I understand that and I accept it, even though I do not agree with him. However, I should be obliged if he would tell us whether he believes that we should summarily dismiss the real concerns of the Norwegians, the Danes, the Irish, the Icelandic people and all the Scandinavian peoples, who share my concerns and make precisely the same demands as I do. The hon. Gentleman wants to dismiss my demands, but would he also dismiss theirs?

Mr. Jenkin: I certainly do not dismiss the hon. Lady's comments, nor do I dismiss the views of other Governments, however, it is important to recognise that, in countries that have proportional representation and where the Greens can hold disproportionate influence over Government policy, Governments can end up running before the vagaries of public opinion, instead of making a hard-headed assessment of what is in the interests of the

[Mr. Jenkin]

country concerned and of the world as a whole. Closing reprocessing plants will not make the problem of nuclear waste go away.

Sir Robert Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I shall not give way again, because I want the Minister to give a proper reply to the debate. Halting reprocessing will not make the problem of nuclear waste disappear, but it is one way of fulfilling our international role.

Openness is key. The nuclear industry has learnt from past incidents that there is no substitute for openness and ensuring that as many people as possible understand the issues involved. There is nothing to be gained from rationing information in the hope of keeping fearful data out of the public domain. That has proved in the past to be a mistake, and the industry has clearly learnt its lesson. The Government and the nuclear industry must deal with the problem by continuing that policy of openness.

I hope that the Minister will reply to all the questions raised in the debate. I also have one or two of my own. Do the Government agree with the decision taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) at the end of the last Parliament that nuclear reprocessing remains the best option? Has the Minister received any advice to suggest that the decision to continue reprocessing is wrong? What advice have the Government sought regarding overall stocks of plutonium? That issue was raised in an Adjournment debate earlier this year, but the Minister did not have time to reply on that occasion.

Are there physical or political constraints on the amount of plutonium that we can accept into this country? Can the Minister confirm that we will continue to re-export much of the reprocessed materials? I am interested in the Minister's views regarding the implications of radioactive levels in shellfish—which was perhaps the main issue raised in the debate. It is suggested that levels of radiation in shellfish, such as lobsters, are dangerous.

Nuclear energy is a vital part of this country's energy industry. Privatisation may have raised questions about its economic efficiency, but it remains one of the cleanest forms of electricity generation. It would be impossible for the Government to meet their targets on greenhouse gas emissions without a continued role for nuclear energy. In addition to those considerations, sites such as the plant at Sellafield are major employers and major contributors to the United Kingdom's balance of payments. BNFL is Britain's biggest yen earner.

Regrettably, the production of nuclear energy generates a limited amount of radioactive waste. It is right and proper that the Government should take all steps in their power to minimise the discharge of such matter and to ensure that as little as possible enters the ecosystem, causing risk to this and future generations. However, it is not possible to prevent those emissions completely, and it would be unrealistic to set a target of reducing future emissions to zero.

The Environment Agency monitors closely the levels of radioactive discharges, and it is ludicrous to suggest that it is somehow implicated in a pro-nuclear conspiracy. The agency is an objective body whose job is to ensure that the general public suffer no appreciable risk. Less than 0.1 per cent. of the total radiation to which the general public in the United Kingdom are exposed comes from waste matter discharged by the nuclear industry.

We therefore give our broad support to the Government's negotiating position at the Ospar meeting. We believe that the Deputy Prime Minister has come some way since his stunts in a wetsuit outside No. 10. However, I must ask how such issues would be dealt with by a Scottish Parliament that was perhaps dominated by alarmists and those seeking to hijack these extremely sensitive issues for their own party political advantage. What would happen if the Scottish Parliament diametrically opposed the Government's negotiating position in Ospar? The Government failed to answer that question during debates on the devolution legislation, and I doubt that they will have an answer today.

12.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth (Ms Cunningham), who is well known for taking a close interest in such issues, on securing this timely Adjournment debate—although we might have been more enlightened about the subject if the debate had occurred after Ospar's conclusion next week. No doubt we shall return to the issue later.

I was astonished to hear the hon. Lady confirm that Scottish National party policy dictates that nuclear waste should be stored where it is generated. That would mean that the 170 tonnes of nuclear waste generated by Scottish power stations, Chapelcross and Torness, and transported to Sellafield every year would have to be stored in Scotland. I am interested to know where the SNP proposes to store that waste material. I think that Dounreay has the capacity to store about 10 tonnes of waste, so where would the SNP store the large amount of waste that travels from Scotland to England every year if it had the chance to put its policy into effect?

As many contributors to the debate have pointed out, my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment are today in Sintra, Portugal representing the United Kingdom at a meeting of the Oslo and Paris convention, which is concerned with the protection of the Atlantic ocean. An important feature of that meeting will be considering ways of reducing radioactive discharges to the marine environment. The Government are fully committed to that objective, and I assure the House that they are working positively to secure an agreement to which all contracting parties to the convention—including the Scandinavian countries—can subscribe and which will ensure improvements in the protection of the marine environment.

The Government share the concerns of those who call for improvements in the protection of our seas. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister appeared in his frogsuit—as various hon. Members have described it—a year ago, and there have been significant reductions in

discharge levels since then. One might conclude that there was a causal effect—perhaps that should be investigated by scientists.

Mr. Jenkin: My faith in the hon. Lady's scientific analysis has been suddenly reduced.

Angela Eagle: The relationship between cause and effect is sometimes not easy to discern. I suspect that most would agree that the reasons for my right hon. Friend's appearance in his frogsuit have diminished—although we are not complacent about the dangers that continuing discharges of radionuclides present to the environment.

The Government share the concerns of those who call for improvements in the protection of our seas. All discharges of radioactive materials, whether to the marine environment or to the atmosphere—those are often the disposal alternatives—are subject to strict regulation in accordance with national and international standards. Those standards ensure that the discharges do not put public health at risk.

At the September 1997 meeting of Ospar, we committed ourselves to making progress on reducing radioactive discharges into the sea. Our aim at the current meeting is to agree a strategy for radioactive substances that is demanding but achievable and will guide the work of the Ospar convention over the next 20 years or more. The exact wording of the strategy will be agreed at the meeting in Portugal by the end of this week. As hon. Members have pointed out, several alternative proposals have been proposed, including one that calls for concentrations in the marine environment that are close to zero for man-made radioactive substances.

In deciding our response, we shall need to have regard to what is deliverable, and we shall also need to take into account the legacy of past actions. We cannot wish away the stockpiles of nuclear materials that have been created by past nuclear activity. We must find a way of either reprocessing or storing those materials. We cannot secure international agreements that do not take account of that legacy with which we clearly must deal.

To ensure that we are able to foresee and avoid problems related to radioactive discharges in future, we shall ask nuclear operators to prepare forward-looking strategies for the next 20 years. I tried to make that point when I intervened on the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith).

Technetium-99 became an issue because of decisions taken in the 1980s to deal with radioactive storage materials from Magnox power stations. Those decisions concentrated on the higher toxic radionuclides rather than technetium-99, which, although it is a cause for concern, is not one of the most toxic radionuclides that could find its way into the sea. As a result of decisions taken in the 1980s, it has become obvious that discharges of technetium-99 have increased, and the Environment Agency is examining the matter. That is why I mentioned, during the speech by the hon. Member for Perth, that the Environment Agency has warned BNFL that it must look at abatement technology for removing technetium-99 so that it does not have to be discharged.

However, there is a time lag between deciding how to deal with a particular form of waste and realising that there may be some radionuclides that were not at the top of one's priority list when the original waste reprocessing was decided.

Sir Robert Smith: Is there a fairly close link between those decisions? If waste is reprocessed, we have the problem of marine discharge; if it is not reprocessed, storage and other solutions do not result in marine discharge.

Angela Eagle: My understanding is that some nuclear waste has to be reprocessed, particularly from the Magnox power stations. If it is not, existing plant would have to be closed down and electricity would not be generated. I note with interest that 50 per cent. of Scotland's power needs are provided by nuclear power, as opposed to 25 per cent. of England's needs. If one decides to close reactors down, where else would the power come from, and what would be the effects of generating it in other ways? This is an holistic debate; the problem cannot be attacked from one side without realising that there are implications in other areas.

As I was saying, we must deal with the legacy as well as future planning in deciding how to generate the power that we all take for granted every day. To ensure that we can foresee and avoid problems such as the technetium-99 effect, we shall ask nuclear operators to prepare forward-looking strategies for the next 20 years.

Hon. Members have expressed concern about a number of incidents at both Sellafield and Dounreay, and the fact that reprocessing is currently not being carried out at either. The Government are determined that the regulators should bear down heavily on any laxness on the part of nuclear operators. We shall ensure that the nuclear industry is effectively and vigorously regulated.

The Government are committed to openness. I agree with the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) about the need to increase transparency in the way in which the nuclear industry deals with the public debate. However, a more open stance also means more awareness of incidents that, in the past, may have been hushed up. All hon. Members should deal with the matter responsibly, so that we can have a meaningful debate that is not alarmist and based on scaremongering, but based on scientific facts.

Following incidents in recent months, the Government's policy of openness has been seen in operation. Openness is essential if the public are to have confidence that the nuclear industry is well managed and safe. Following a breakdown in the electrical supply at Dounreay, the Health and Safety Executive required the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority to stop processing and reprocessing activities in the fuel cycle area. Following leakage from pipework within a contained cell at Sellafield, the thermal oxide reprocessing plant was closed down. In neither incident was there an adverse radiological impact to the work force or the general public. I want to reassure the House that the Health and Safety Executive will not permit either plant to reopen until it is satisfied that they can be restarted safely.

[Angela Eagle]

The Government have available to them a number of expert and independent bodies that conduct research and make recommendations about the various aspects of radioactivity and radiation exposure. We shall ensure that the Government, the regulators, the nuclear industry and the public at large continue to have access to the best scientific advice, so that we can all have confidence that the industry operated within safe limits.

Mr. Dalyell: Is there any news about the likely immediate future of THORP?

Angela Eagle: The HSE and BNFL are investigating the incident. They seek various reassurances about what happened, and will not authorise a re-start until they are satisfied that it is safe to do so. That involves investigating how the escape happened in a contained area.

The Government announced in June this year that there would be no new commercial reprocessing at Dounreay. The decision was taken on a number of grounds, including UKAEA's view that reprocessing there was no longer commercially viable. None of the factors that applied at Dounreay apply at Sellafield. For technical reasons, spent Magnox fuel must be reprocessed. For other spent nuclear fuels, the Government accept that it is for the fuel's owner to determine the best management option, but within a very strict regulatory regime. The reprocessing of foreign spent fuel does not increase the amount of radioactive waste to be disposed of in this country.

In answer to questions asked during the debate, I can confirm that each reprocessing contract provides for the resulting wastes to be returned to the country of origin. Those countries have all signed the non-proliferation treaty, so the mythical market in plutonium does not exist. There are very strict limits.

I am aware of the concerns about the discharge of technetium-99 from Sellafield into the Irish sea, and that deposits of technetium-99 have been found on the Irish side of the sea and as far away as Scandinavia. I hope that what I said about the Environment Agency's view, and the fact that BNFL will have to come up with abatement technology, will deal with that problem.

Much of the radioactive contamination of the seas around our coastline occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. It is important to bear in mind that overall discharges of radioactivity are significantly lower today than they were then. Taking all radioactive discharges from Sellafield—both to the atmosphere and to the sea—current discharges are just 1 per cent. of the peak in the 1970s. We shall ensure that that trend continues, but we must remember that previous discharges can still be found when tests are carried out.

The House will know that British Nuclear Fuels has applied to the Environment Agency for variations to some of the Sellafield discharge limits. The agency carried out a consultation exercise earlier in the year and is now considering its determination of the applications in the light of consultees' views.

The Radioactive Substances Act 1963 gives the Secretary of State for the Environment the power to decide radioactive discharge applications. A number of requests have been made to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to exercise that power in respect of the present Sellafield applications. I understand from the Environment Agency that it expects to be in a position to determine the applications by the end of September. I assure the House that the call-in requests are under consideration and that a decision will be reached about whether the applications should be called in before the agency issues any determination.

The House will appreciate that, because of the statutory function that my right hon. Friend has to exercise in this case, I cannot comment about the merits of the applications or say at this stage what decision will be reached on the call-in requests. I can assure the House that all the representations made to the Government on this issue, including those by hon. Members, will be carefully considered in reaching a decision. I can also confirm that the Government have made it clear to the Environment Agency that we expect to see progressive reductions in discharges and discharge limits at the Sellafield, site where practicable.

Let me remind the House of some of the positive steps that we have taken with regard to Dounreay. The Dounreay waste shaft was licensed before I was born, which illustrates my point about legacy. Since the explosion there in 1977, the shaft has been monitored. However, a range of options had been prepared to identify a lasting solution to that difficult problem. In March of this year, the Government announced that we accepted the site operators' recommendation that the waste in the Dounreay shaft and the related wet silo should be retrieved for treatment and storage. Current indicative costs suggest that expenditure may be between £215 million and £355 million, spread over 25 years.

On reprocessing activities at Dounreay, we announced last month that no further commercial reprocessing contracts would be entered into, which will allow Dounreay to concentrate on reprocessing its own fuel, the Georgian material and existing commercial contracts. That limited programme of reprocessing is likely to be completed around 2006.

We also took positive action in response to the detection, off shore from Dounreay, of fragments of irradiated fuel, by imposing a precautionary ban on the taking of sea fish from the waters within a two-mile radius, and work continues to identify the source of that problem.

That standpoint of openness with vigorous regulation is evidenced by our welcome for the prompt and wide-ranging review of safety management being conducted at Dounreay by the HSE and by SEPA. We expect the UKAEA to respond promptly to any recommendations made following the review. We also welcome the robust role generally adopted by the independent regulators. I repeat that we are not complacent on these issues, even though many of the problems we face are legacies.

The Government are committed to protecting the marine environment, and we are working with our partners in Ospar to secure progress on that. We have shown our willingness to act to protect our seas. Soon after we were elected, we announced in Ospar that we would give up the opt-out on dumping radioactive waste at sea, which effectively closed the door on any resumption of that practice.

Recent actions by the regulators at Sellafield and at Dounreay show that the arrangements are open, and that tough action is taken when required. The decision to shut down operations in the fuel cycle area at Dounreay was taken on a number of grounds, but, as we made clear in announcing that decision, environmental considerations were taken into account. We shall continue to ensure that the industry is well regulated.

Clean-coal Technology

12.30 pm

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck): I thank the House for allowing me to secure the debate. I shall develop an argument for Government support for clean-coal technology in the context of an integrated regional energy programme, and will use practical examples of best practice to show that we can develop complementary energy systems—some based on renewables and all with the ability to be used nationally and traded internationally. That would allow Britain to develop a diverse, sustainable and secure source of energy.

My constituency is in the north-east of England, which has the potential to develop sources of renewable energy. A seven-turbine wind farm was built at the edge of my constituency six years ago, at the entrance to Blyth harbour. It generates enough electricity to power 1,500 homes. Plans are in place for two large wind turbines to be placed offshore and, if successful, they could be the blueprint for many more similar installations around Britain's coastline. There are more wind turbine companies in the north-east than in any other part of Britain, and a wind turbine can be manufactured small enough and economically enough to allow hill farmers and dairy farmers to produce electricity economically.

Northumbria university is a world leader in photovoltaics, which is the conversion of sunlight into electricity. The technology is capable not only of helping to reduce greenhouse gases, but could help business development and, therefore, wealth creation. The Ove Arup Newcastle office is the worldwide centre for all its photovoltaic work, and Sundwell Solar supplies a third of the United Kingdom's solar thermal units.

The region is home to major consultancies such as Meiz and Mclellan, and we have architects and system designers, all of whom are poised to pool their related expertise for the design, supply and installation of photovoltaic systems for the global market. There are more than 200 rivers and streams in the area, yet we have only one hydro-electric scheme, at Kielder. We have room for many more.

The region is energy-rich, and our greatest energy asset is coal. The great northern coalfield stretches from north Yorkshire almost to the Scottish border, and coal has been mined there for more than 600 years. Our only remaining deep coal mine is Ellington colliery, which employs 500 people, and works the rich seams seven miles out under the North sea.

We have two coal-fired power stations in the constituency. One is owned by Alcan and supplies the aluminium smelter. My hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry will be aware that the power station and the smelter have just undergone a £100 million refurbishment, because he visited the plant recently. His encouragement and support played a major role in securing that investment, and I am grateful to him. Part of that investment went into providing new turbines, which will increase the efficiency of the station by 5 per cent. and reduce emissions by 14 per cent. The added bonus was that the turbines were made at Siemens Power Generation on Tyneside—a plant with a worldwide reputation for engineering excellence.

The Alcan power station is only 25 years old. It complies with all its emission requirements, and could be a site for the fitting of clean-coal units. The other

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coal-fired station—Blyth A and B—is an entirely different story. It is owned by National Power and is one of the oldest coal-fired stations in Britain. It does not appear to be used a great deal and, although no announcement has been made by National Power, informed opinion is that it has about two years to run. It would be a perfect site for a new energy centre, combining a clean-coal power station, a recycling plant and the generation of electricity with a fuel mix of coal and pellets from waste manufactured on-site.

Blyth power station is a regional asset. It stands in one of the best transport positions in Britain and has a deep-water berth in the port of Blyth with direct access to the North sea. The rail link into the station is close to the east coast main line and there is a dual carriageway linking through the A19 to the Tyneside conurbation. Coal stocking and ash disposal are on site, so planning permission would be much easier to obtain without a lengthy and expensive public inquiry. The switchgear and grid infrastructure are already in place.

There are two attractions of substituting some fuel by introducing waste to the clean-coal technology project: there would be a reduction in fuel costs, and there could be a beneficial impact on the environment. Many of our large cities are experiencing major problems disposing of household waste. Landfill sites are at a premium, which enables owners to make ever increasing charges in line with what the market will bear and to compensate themselves for the long-term liability that the sites carry. The possibility of an increase in landfill tax will put pressure on waste producers to find other methods of disposal.

About 300,000 tonnes of waste of all types is landfilled in Northumberland alone, but there is evidence that landfilling is no longer the best option. The recent European meeting on the clean-coal technology programme concluded:

"Far too many organic wastes or residues are landfilled or composted."

They emit carbon dioxide, methane dioxins and other harmful products to the atmosphere and to groundwater. Methane is a much worse greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, and recent studies have shown that composting of waste may form high levels of dioxins that may be avoided or destroyed in a combustion process.

I am not suggesting for a moment that we simply burn all our household waste; recycling plant would enable much of it to be recycled. As a nation, we do not recover valuable products such as metal, plastics and paper; generally speaking, they are simply buried.

A commercial recycling plant would encourage local authorities to inform householders of the benefits of sorting and separating household rubbish at source, in the home. The proposed energy centre at Blyth is adjacent to a large industrial site, which makes it ideal for the addition of an element of combined heat and power. That would dramatically increase the thermal efficiency of the plant through the subsequent reduction in emissions.

Refitting an existing power station with clean-coal technology is not only cost-effective; it helps in the longer term to achieve our commitment substantially to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions. I was pleased that that commitment was spelled out in the recent White Paper, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to examine the time scale for compliance.

We need to protect the environment, but we also need to protect and enhance our quality of life and employment opportunities. There is little point in the young mother taking her children to school commenting on the freshness of the cold morning air if her husband is unemployed and they are struggling to feed and clothe their children. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to try to achieve a balance between our physical and our social environment—and achieving such a balance will be much easier if clean-coal technology is adopted.

I am confident that the new energy centre will receive funds through the European joule and thermie programmes, which allow funding of demonstration projects as well as research and development. The new energy centre company could be a partnership, bringing together local authorities, equipment manufacturers, regional electricity companies and generators such as National Power. That partnership might produce sufficient capital to ensure the survival of the project; but, given that it may not, will my hon. Friend the Minister consider providing Government funds to enhance the various European programmes and to make clean-coal burning not just a theory but a reality?

I have used Blyth power station as an example, but many other coal-fired stations could benefit from clean-coal technology. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to use his good offices to urge generators to invest in such technology now, where that is appropriate, to ensure security of electricity supply and to guarantee the long-term survival of what is left of Britain's mining industry.

Mr. John Cummings (Easington): Would it not be rather ironic if the investment that we are asking from our British Government were spent on the burning of clean coal in Germany? A ridiculous arrangement currently exists because of the high subsidies given to the German mining industry. Will not the Government investment for which we are asking be at risk if the question of subsidies is not resolved once and for all?

Mr. Murphy: I agree wholeheartedly.

Coal still has a major role to play as an industry producing fuel for the future, and it could play a large part in building a new clean-energy centre in my constituency. As well as being rich in energy, the north-east is rich in ideas, innovation and engineering. Not only could we use the new technologies locally; we could design and manufacture equipment for global markets.

Power stations throughout the world use equipment designed and manufactured on Tyneside. The first house to be lit by electricity is in Northumberland—Cragside, near Rothbury. We have exported our ideas and products to every corner of the land. Recently, I had the good fortune to visit the Cabinet war rooms. In the Cabinet room itself, deep below Whitehall, I saw two massive girders running the length of the room and supporting the whole structure. Those girders have carried that colossal weight for half a century. I was pleased, but not surprised, to see stamped on them the words "Made in Gateshead". They are as good today as they were 50 years ago.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his efforts to give coal a fairer deal, and for throwing the industry lifeline. I remind the House that coal from

Northumberland fuelled the industrial revolution and has powered this century. I believe that, as a nation, we have a responsibility to ensure that there is a place for it in the millennium, and clean-coal technology will guarantee that place.

12.43 pm

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): Usually, in Adjournment debates, hon. Members draw the House's attention to a complaint or a difficulty in their constituencies. Rarely have I heard a speech so full of practical vision and new possibilities as the thought-provoking contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy). He said that the north-east was rich in ideas, innovation and engineering, and I think that his speech more than demonstrated that.

I am determined that the need to generate energy should not be seen to be at odds with consideration for the environment and the future. My hon. Friend presented us with his vision of a new energy centre, blending clean-coal technology with the recycling of waste; he also conveyed a sense of balance that I found very helpful. I agree with him about the need to think things out at a local level and to see that process as a microcosm that shows what can be done with the aid of practical vision, nationally and internationally.

I believe that clean-coal technologies are the key to the coal industry's future, not only in Britain but internationally. World coal use is likely to increase from 3.5 billion tonnes to more than 5.3 billion tonnes by 2010, and increases substantially beyond that are forecast. If that amount is to be burned, it is vital for clean-coal technologies to be developed. We have some experience here in Britain.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Government support the development of clean-coal technology and welcome his endorsement of a sustained, diverse, secure and integrated approach to energy generation. I have visited Alcan power station and, as an Opposition spokesman, I visited Northumbria university and saw its photovoltaics. Great work is going on there. There is also an earth balance project, which brings together a range of new technologies and spells out the fact that, by integrating such technologies, we can find a practical way forward that provides much-needed energy and warmth for local communities.

We must concentrate on the tough environmental challenges we face. My hon. Friend referred to the setting of targets that might prematurely squeeze out energy generation and jobs. At the Kyoto conference, the European Union agreed to reduce its emissions of a basket of six greenhouse gases—including carbon dioxide and sulphur dioxide—by 8 per cent., relative to the 1990 level, during the period 2008–12.

On 17 June, at the meeting of the Environment Council in Europe, member states agreed on the way in which the target should be apportioned. Our target is a 12.5 per cent. reduction. That means that the time for talking is over. We must establish programmes to meet the targets—and that brings us back to the practical vision presented by my hon. Friend.

Clean-coal technologies have an important part to play in the delivery of the agenda. Coal burning leads to emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide—usually referred to as sox and nox. We must reduce the level of pollution. We are keen to support cleaner coal technologies. I emphasise the word "cleaner": no energy generation source is entirely pure and clean, and that includes renewable energy and even wind farms. I am not suggesting that schemes in Blyth and elsewhere are challenged by environmental insensitivities, or for aesthetic reasons; I am saying that we can aim for cleaner forms of generation and look to renewable sources such as combined heat and power to reduce the amount of waste.

Sulphur dioxide emissions from the major electricity generators in England and Wales are already programmed to fall to 365 kilotonnes in 2005. That target—with significant interim reductions—must be achieved. We believe that coal-fired generators must now take reasonable steps to run their plant more cleanly. Cleaning up at the back end, as it were, with fluidised gas desulphurisation is one option. At present, two plants in Britain—National Power's Drax plant, and PowerGen's Ratcliffe plant in the midlands—are the only ones that do that. We must also consider the front end, in the hope that coal can be burned not only in a cleaner way—as my hon. Friend suggested—but in a more energy-efficient way. We need to tackle not just the nox and the sox, but carbon dioxide emissions. I know that my hon. Friend appreciates that.

We are faced with real challenges. The Environment Agency is now discussing with generators proposals to revise emission limits. We expect those discussions to encompass the implications of, for example, the likely lifetime and usage of coal-fired power stations and policy on flue gas desulphurisation systems. In our recent policy statement on power generation sources—which we put out for consultation—we recommended that all power generators should consider fitting FGD immediately as a means of meeting targets on sulphur dioxide emissions. We must go further and develop the work that we have done on clean-coal technology.

Blyth power station is owned by National Power. I am not sure from my hon. Friend's comments whether National Power has been presented with this vision of Blyth as an energy centre. I am more than happy to discuss this matter further with my hon. Friend, and to approach National Power directly to see whether such a vision can be implemented.

There are European directives and legislation on waste. I am not clear about combining waste pellets with the new developments in clean-coal technologies. I am more than happy to explore all the possibilities with my hon. Friend, rather than let them remain fallow.

My hon. Friend mentioned the wind project at Blyth harbour. It is one of the wind farms of the future, because wind generation will move from the highlands to the coast and offshore. We are currently preparing for that in our proposals for renewable energy support through the non-fossil fuel obligation projects.

It is evident that clean-coal plants will have to have considerably lower emissions of carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide than existing coal-fired plants. They should not generate solid or liquid waste that results in the environmental problems associated with power stations. Constraints will be tighter in the future, and we must find ways of coping with them.

I emphasise that my Department already has a clean-coal research and development programme. It has supported a substantial portfolio of clean-coal

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technologies in the past few years. We recently conducted a thorough review to see what we can be done to bring together the research carried out under the Department's energy directorate and under the science budgets. The Government support £3.7 million-worth of research on clean-coal technologies. The development of advanced power generation technologies offers the promise of developing technologies with efficiencies of more than 50 per cent.

At present, an ordinary, traditional, coal-burning power station burns at about 38 per cent. thermal efficiency. The new gas power stations—the combined cycle gas turbines—burn at about 58 per cent. at best. If we move to combined heat and power, the figure could be as high as 90 per cent. We must also improve the thermal efficiency of traditional coal-burning power stations. Clean-coal technologies are not just about removing the nox and the sox; they are also about increasing thermal efficiency. Some of the technologies can achieve efficiencies of more than 50 per cent. That will be a bonus for those power stations.

People are wrong to write off clean-coal technology and to say that it is not practical because the rules will change. It is wrong to say that it may remove sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide but will not help with carbon dioxide. It can help to tackle the carbon dioxide targets.

Technologies are beginning to be available: they are under development and will soon be brought on stream. A few companies in Britain are planning to build new clean-coal power generation plant. Global Energy has recently applied for a section 36 approval to build a 400 MW plant in Scotland. Celtic Energy is examining the feasibility of building a 250 MW plant in Wales. PowerGen and National Power have invested in clean-coal plant overseas. They see a huge market for clean-coal technology. If that is the case, there must be potential in Britain.

Funding is available through the European Union thermie and joule programmes. Under our presidency of the EU, I negotiated the fifth framework science programme, and we are about to launch the next tranche of proposals. Budgets must be settled in detail, so it may be implemented in 18 months' time. Companies should put in their bids and see whether their vision can be implemented using that grant. There is potential under that programme.

We shall publish an energy paper in the autumn setting out our new policy on clean-coal technology. We have to tie in the details with the comprehensive spending review and we must think through the implications for each local programme. We intend to include in our energy paper the recommendations of the science panels that highlighted clean-coal technologies as a way forward.

The impact of clean-coal technologies will not be immediate, because they take time to develop. There are about six options. It will not be easy to find the best, most appropriate option that will meet the targets for the future. The options include supercritical or advanced pulverised fuel, atmospheric fluidised bed combustion, pressurised fluidised bed combustion, integrated gasification combined cycle and air gasification-gas turbine.

The second generation of clean-coal technologies are also being developed. I emphasise that there are a number of technologies, and they meet different needs. They include the new British Coal air blown gasification cycle and various others. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) is present. It grieves me that we developed clean-coal technology—it was developed at Grimethorpe in Yorkshire—but let the patent pass to ABB, and now a Swedish-Swiss company markets it throughout the world. We should be back at the forefront of clean-coal science and technological development. We must show the international use of those technologies, because I am convinced that there is an international market, which will ensure that coal has a solid future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Mr. Cummings) mentioned the challenge that we face in Europe. Two UK companies have lodged objections with the European Commission to the coal subsidies in Germany and Spain. We are supporting them to ensure that our industry is not damaged by unfair subsidies elsewhere. It is not comfortable to press the case, but we shall tackle unfair competition that damages our industry. Celtic Energy has already obtained a settlement, but we must keep pressing to ensure that our companies are not damaged. The rules should not be applied disproportionately and unfairly at the expense of our industry. Our actions are in marked contrast to those of the previous Government. If we use the language of a level playing field, we should fight to ensure that we get one.

Our review of renewable energy policy has considered how we can meet 10 per cent. of demand from renewable sources. Our target is for 10 per cent. of energy generation to come from renewables by 2010. That leaves 90 per cent. to be generated from coal, gas and nuclear power, so it is only a modest proportion. We are reviewing the panoply of renewable energy, including biomass from crops, which can be turned into pellets, and wind, offshore and onshore, which has developed quite quickly. We are considering the capacity of hydropower to see whether there is small-scale potential. We are also looking at methane gas from landfill waste as a means of generating energy.

I recently visited a school to launch the first solar panel in a school under the SCOLAR programme. We want youngsters in 100 schools to experience photovoltaic technology and to see how energy can be generated from light and can be developed to become economic so that it can be used in the new century. We are investing resources in that area, and are pushing the agenda forward.

The Government are giving such priority to renewable and new sources of energy, including clean-coal technology, that we are moving to the forefront of the debate in Britain and in Europe. Selling that technology internationally creates jobs and ensures that other parts of the world get cleaner sources of energy. It is a win, win situation. Developing the technologies generates new work and jobs, enhances the environment and tackles degradation and environmental challenges. I hope that that vision matches our intensely local vision. Perhaps that beacon can be a means of showing the way to tackling energy generation and the environment in an integrated and balanced way. In future, we should not set energy generation against the environment but adopt practical and positive ways that will enable us to respect the environment, tackle the pollution that we have inherited and ensure that there is enough heat and light to serve our needs.

Left-handed Children

1 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): This is an occasion to stand up for lefties' rights, and I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the topic. I declare an interest in that I am a lefty, although not of the political kind, and an honorary member of the Left-Handers Club of Great Britain.

This is a campaign which I hoped never to have to fight, but, like the great civil rights campaigners of the past, I have learnt the hard way how discrimination works. An arrogant or unlistening majority—in this case right-handers, rather than men or whites—refuses to understand the problem or even to accept that it exists. Only when the oppressed minority—in this case, left-handers—makes its presence felt do things happen. Today, I hope that the left-handers of the nation are making their presence felt.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), whom I am delighted to see in the Chamber, drew my attention to the long campaign of *The Economist* on the issue. It began in about 1962 and was renewed in December 1986, when it invited its readers to join the magazine

"in a stroll down Sinister Street."

It said:

"No, this is not an invitation to wallow in dirt, darkness, death and devilry. It is a summons to final victory over handism. How about making 1987 the Year of the LEFT hand? It is time to remove the vile marks with which that hand has been branded, and to restore to mankind a huge potential that has long been cast aside.

Come 1987, a quarter of a century will have passed since *The Economist*, setting out the case for a Universal Declaration of Human Lefts, displayed the slogan 'Loofers, arise!' on its cover. 'Loofers' referred to the habit dictionaries have of sneering at Left's derivation from such words as the very Low Dutch loof, meaning weak or worthless."

That bears an uncanny resemblance to my name.

I fear that such words are commonplace, and some are a great deal worse. Again according to *The Economist*, researchers preparing a survey of English dialects found 88 different words for left-handed in local use in the 1950s. Such words include buck-fisted, cack-handed, caggy, clicky, corrie-pawed, cow-pawed, cuddy-wifter, dolly-pawed, gar-pawed, gibble-fisted, golly-handed, keck-fisted, keggy-handed, left-plug, left-kelly, scoochy, scrammy-handed, skiffle-handed, south-pawed, spuddy-handed and plain squiffy.

Most of these terms are uncomplimentary, none more so than cack-handed and its variants, but—in the interests of my language remaining parliamentary—I shall not pursue that.

We may be a minority, but we seem to be growing. At the beginning of the century, the doctrinaire assertion that only 2 per cent. of mankind are naturally sinistral was orthodox enough to be chosen for citation in the "Shorter Oxford Dictionary". A 1954 estimate put the proportion in America at between 5 and 8 per cent. A 1976 study of 11-year-olds in British schools showed that left-handed children, who, 12 years earlier, had been rated at 6 per cent., already represented 10.4 per cent. Some people think that the figure now may be as high as 15 per cent. However, even one in 10 is high enough to make us take the issue seriously.

I shall again put the matter in an historical context. According to *The Economist*:

"Our ape cousins do not discriminate. Nor did mankind during most of its existence. There is ample evidence, from flint-working and cave paintings, that our Stone Age ancestors were even-handed. Dextral domination began only a few thousand years ago. Moreover, there are some indications that the whole thing could have swung the other way."

To justify that claim, the magazine reminds us how many languages read from right to left. It even claims that left-handedness was the dominant condition south of the equator, and that it was related to sun worship and domination by various civilisations. However, that is a whole new and fascinating subject, which time does not allow me to explore.

The explanation of left-handedness is simple. I understand that it is to do with the dominance of one of the hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere controls the body's right side, and the right hemisphere controls the left side. That means that only left-handed people are truly in their right minds. Even so, we are discriminated against, not only by the failure of successive Governments to address our problems but by language. Hon. Members should reflect on words such as gauche and sinister, and their roots. The word "right" is always associated with good.

The Economist offered several reworkings of familiar phrases to make its point. They are:

"Might is left; his heart is in the left place; wait for Mr. Left to come along; my country, left or wrong; God's in his heaven—all's left with the world; the divine left of kings; it will all come left in the end"—

and on a more European note, "Dieu et mon gauche".

I regret that even the Bible is not exempt, with the Psalmists particularly culpable. There are more than 100 handist phrases, such as:

"At Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

I need hardly tell the House on which side the goats were placed at the final judgment before they were cursed and sent into everlasting fire.

It is not all bad. As *The Economist* reminded us in 1986, left-handers have the upper hand in some areas. It stated:

"Six years ago French researchers, who had noted the capture by left-handed fencers of the first eight places in the Olympic men's foil, demonstrated that in such combat sinistrals reactions are fractionally faster. It seems that a fighting man's left arm and hand have a split-second advantage because of their direct link with the brain's right hemisphere which handles spatial skills.

This could also have a bearing on the prominence in top-level tennis, baseball and cricket of the relatively small numbers who play left-handed. Nowadays, nobody is surprised when three of the four semi-finalists at Wimbledon are loofers. In his time, 'Babe' Ruth held no fewer than 54 major league records. In 1975 that scoochy all-rounder Gary Sobers became Sir Garfield after setting Test cricket records for wickets and catches as well as for centuries and runs scored in one innings."

Many people believe that left-handers are above averagely intelligent and creative. Perhaps they have a point. Certainly, famous left-handers are thick on the ground. They include Charlie Chaplin, Denis Compton, W. C. Fields, Judy Garland, Jimi Hendrix, Holbein, Danny Kaye, Rod Laver, Paul McCartney, Compton Mackenzie, Marcel Marceau, Jessie Matthews, Martina Navratilova, Cole Porter, Telly Savalas, Ronald Searle, Mark Spitz, Charlemagne—I do not know how we

[Mr. Peter Luff]

know that, but apparently we do—Jimmy Connors, Greta Garbo, George VI, Leonardo da Vinci—another historical mystery, but apparently he was left-handed—John McEnroe, Shirley MacLaine, Harpo Marx, Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, Joan of Arc, Napoleon Bonaparte, Julius Caesar himself, David Bowie, Noel Gallagher, George Michael, and even, I am told, Melinda Messenger.

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): And me.

Mr. Luff: I am delighted to hear that. There are many other left-handed hon. Members. We are a small minority and, I understand, disproportionately represented in the debate.

There are more. Harry Truman, George Bush, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan are or were left-handed. Indeed, at a presidential election in the United States, all three candidates, including Ross Perot, were left-handed. I should also mention that my colleague on the Select Committee on Agriculture, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) is one of the distinguished parliamentary band of lefties—but then we all knew that already.

We are part of a distinguished club, but things have been bad for us, although some have got better. Technical advances have continued to level matters. For instance, the word processor has reinforced the typewriter's liberating power in freeing us from the very real difficulties of left-handed writing. Shops such as Anything Left-Handed, in Worcester and in Brewer street, London, sell all manner of gadgets to make our lives easier. They include pencil sharpeners, scissors, can openers and clocks that go backwards.

It was my then constituent, the proprietor of Anything Left-Handed in Worcester, Mark Stewart, who first drew my attention to the scale of the problem that faces left-handed children in our schools and to the fact that, given the will, something could easily be done about it. I know that Mr. Stewart's new representative in the House, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), shares that view.

I have worked with Mr. Stewart and his colleague in London, Lauren Milsom, very closely. We had a hard-won meeting with the Teacher Training Agency. It was hard won because the first stage was to work out where on earth responsibility lay. That happened in the previous Parliament, and letters were batted between Department and agency in a Kafkaesque way. However, we got there in the end, and the then Government decided that responsibility lay with the agency.

At the meeting, we were advised to regard the subject as one for the special educational needs curriculum. I took that advice, but I am no longer convinced that I was right—I have automatically slipped into handist language; I am no longer convinced that I was correct. Left-handedness is not a disability, although, if children are not given appropriate guidance at the earliest possible age, development can be impaired, confidence lost and opportunities permanently damaged.

I think that left-handedness is an issue of equal opportunity. The discrimination at one level may be less than it was, but only this morning I heard on BBC Hereford and Worcester of a seven-year-old boy whose school had tried to force him to write with his right hand. I do not think that it used the more aggressive methods of our Victorian forebears—tying a hand behind the back or on to a chair—but it subtly encouraged him to use his right hand. He could not do it. It was only when he had a new teacher, who understood the problems of left-handedness and helped him to cope with them, that his academic work progressed as it should have done. He was absolutely delighted with what happened after the new teacher took control of his destiny.

The problem is that children who are encouraged to believe that there is something wrong with writing left-handed ask, "Why is what is right for me wrong?" They cannot understand it. In class, that manifests itself in all sorts of ways. Children who have difficulty with their writing, their colouring or their cutting out, because they have been encouraged to regard themselves as right-handed, will try to avoid the activities that cause them difficulty, leading directly to slow development and under-achievement.

Teachers need to be trained to recognise the symptoms of left-handedness, respond to them positively and help those children to use their left hands. Left-handed children who try to use their right hand will often cope, but that is all they will do. They will not excel as they might have done, and their development is delayed. Only if teachers are encouraged to recognise left-handedness early will that be prevented.

Even at sport, where left-handedness can be a distinct advantage, schools can penalise us lefties. Failure to recognise left-handedness with a bat, ball or racquet, can lead children to be encouraged to play against their natural instincts with their right hand. I am left wondering how many Wimbledon champions and fine test cricketers we have lost in the process.

Left-handed pupils need to use different equipment in the classroom, yet in some classrooms in some schools, even the simplest bit of kit, left-handed scissors, are not available. One school recently wrote to Mr. Stewart saying that to provide them would be difficult, because it would confuse the right-handed pupils to have different types of scissors. What about the left-handed pupils who are forced to use equipment that does not suit their natural way of doing things?

Left-handed people often need the mouse for their computer to be on the left hand, not the right hand, side of their screen. It is important that schools lay out information technology rooms so that there is space for the mouse on the left if that is what the child wants. The child may also need to have space for his notes on the left of the computer. As it happens, I have my mouse on the right and my notes on the left, so I take space on both sides. We are all slightly different, and teachers need to be sensitive to that information technology requirement. If schools make that possible, we shall be able to cope as well as our right-handed friends, rather than their having an unfair advantage.

Keeping friends can be a problem. If a left-handed child is seated on the right of a right-handed child, there are frequent clashes of elbows. That can quickly destroy relationships between children and even lead to fights in the classroom. We must ensure that a left-handed child sits on the other side of a shared desk to avoid any clashing of elbows.

Above all, left-handed people need guidance in writing. Smudging and being unable to read what one has written is the chief difficulty that I have encountered, as a result of which I write with an exceptionally uncomfortable and awkward style, right over the top—called by experts the hook style of writing. I am told that I have a classic hook style, which avoids smudging and means that I can read what I have written. However, I find handwriting difficult—it is awkward and uncomfortable, and I avoid it whenever I can. I believe that I was penalised in my examinations because I could not write as fast as right-handed children. Yet there are easy techniques available to help children to write properly. It is all to do with where one positions the paper on the desk, and then one can write comfortably and easily, and the problem goes away.

Despite all that, teacher training guidelines contain no specific reference to left-handedness. If teachers are not trained to deal with these issues, if they are not sensitised to them, they will not be properly aware of the difficulties and be able to ensure that left-handed children are afforded the attention they need.

The central issue is one of equality of opportunity—equal access to equipment, equal standards, and no unnecessary barriers in the way of our development. There is a staggering lack of official information on left-handedness, which has led to much ignorance in the educational establishment. For example, the Department for Education and Employment revealed:

"The Department does not collect information on what proportion of pupils are left-handed, nor on whether being left-handed has an impact on likely educational achievement."—[*Official Report*, 17 April 1996; Vol. 275, c. *540*.]

We are dealing with a large number of children. It is estimated that there are 1.1 million left-handed children in our primary and secondary schools. The effect of co-ordinated action to bring out the best in all pupils will have an impact on all of us—particularly on children—in later life and at work.

I had hoped to share with the Minister and the House some detailed personal accounts of the difficulties faced by left-handed children and their parents. Shops like Anything Left-Handed receive a regular stream of letters from people expressing great gratitude for the way in which their children's lives have been transformed by what those shops are doing to help them realise that there is an answer to the problems. I should be happy to send the Minister moving accounts of the difficulties experienced, if she would find that helpful.

This is not a theoretical problem—it affects thousands upon thousands of our children in our schools every academic year. It is not a party political issue; it is a campaign which I began well before the last general election. I have asked questions of, and corresponded with, Ministers for several years. The problem is getting the Department for Education and Employment to recognise that there is a problem. For example, a letter from the Secretary of State's private secretary, dated 20 November 1997, stated:

"It is not felt that left-handed pupils will have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age, nor will it make it difficult for them to use the education facilities provided locally."

That is simply wrong. In the absence of proper organisation and well-thought-through classroom strategies, there are real problems.

The Government could easily deal with the problems. Most of all, I want to hear from the Minister today some acknowledgement that there are problems. That would be a breakthrough and a huge source of encouragement for left-handed campaigners throughout the country. The good news for the Government is that taking action would cost them virtually nothing; it is a zero-cost challenge. The Government should instruct the Teacher Training Agency to ensure that left-handedness is on the teacher training curriculum and that qualified teachers are provided with appropriate guidance.

The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart)—herself an enlightened teacher when it comes to left-handedness—told me recently that teachers are taught all kinds of details about the finer points of phonics, which are of no practical use in the classroom, when an hour or so on the identification of left-handed children and how to help them would be of immensely greater value.

The assurances that campaigners seek from the Minister are simple. The first is that, for the first time ever, the issue is being taken seriously by the Government. That would be enormously encouraging. The second is that the Government will take practical action to ensure that schools tackle the challenge of left-handedness.

When I was discussing the matter with my colleagues this morning, we came up with the thought that perhaps it could be part of the standard assessment test process, with teachers being required to indicate whether a child was left or right-handed. That would raise awareness in schools and focus the minds of teachers on the need to think about these issues rather earlier than many do at present.

Thirdly and most important, the teacher training syllabus should include left-handedness. It would not take a great deal of time, and it would be simple to deliver. That suggestion was rejected by the Department most recently in a letter on 27 May, but I hope that we can persuade the Minister to think again.

We need now teachers in the classroom who understand the problems. In that respect, I can conclude on an optimistic note. The Post Office is close to finalising a deal with Anything Left-Handed and the Left-Handers Club of Great Britain to produce a video and wall chart to help current teachers to understand what they can do to help left-handers. The video is being produced on the advice of the Teacher Training Agency, which has offered to assist with its distribution. I am a little surprised—I must be honest—that production of a piece of mainstream educational training material has had to rely on sponsorship rather than Government funding, but there we are.

The video should be produced quite soon, and I sincerely thank the Post Office for its enlightened sponsorship—which is genuinely first class. I hope that the Minister will welcome that initiative and commend it to schools, to enhance the prospect of their obtaining the material and applying it in the classroom.

The Government's reply to the debate will be made by one of their most sympathetic and diligent Ministers. A lot hangs on what she says in the next few minutes. If she does not accept that there is a problem, I really

[Mr. Luff]

do not know who will. Today is the day that we lefties demand our rights. I hope that we will not be disappointed.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) not only on obtaining the debate but on the way in which he has tackled the issue—not only while I have been a Minister at the Department for Education and Employment but during the previous Government's time in office.

I was interested to hear at the beginning of the hon. Gentleman's speech that he is an honorary member of the Left-Handers Club. I had not known anyone in the club until I met him, and he has certainly put it on my agenda in a way that no one else has.

I know that the hon. Gentleman sincerely cares about the issue and thinks that it is of real importance to many children in our schools. If he thinks that left-handedness has affected his development—I have had a quick chat with the Government Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope), who also is left-handed and has concurred with some of the hon. Gentleman's comments—the issue must be of concern to the Government. We do not want to pretend that it is not an issue. Today, therefore, I am prepared also to stand up for the rights of left-handed people. The debate centres on how great an issue it is and on exactly what has to be done.

We are accustomed in politics to arguing about left and right, and about the differences between the two, but the hon. Gentleman has put a new gloss on that debate. I wondered briefly whether the Government's search for a third way might be relevant to this debate, but—after 30 seconds—decided that, of all policy spheres, perhaps only left-handedness does not offer a third way. It really is a debate about left and right, and perhaps about achieving equal rights.

I hope that things have changed. My father was left-handed as a child and was forced to write with his right hand; he has developed the ability to write equally well with either hand—he is ambidextrous. The hon. Gentleman gave interesting examples of words that were used to describe left-handed people. I hope that none of them would be used now for that purpose.

I accept that there has been prejudice and discrimination against left-handed people, and a feeling that left-handedness was wrong and unacceptable. It was thought that left-handed people, perhaps like people with a squint in their eye, needed to be treated—corrective measures had to be taken so that they could be like the rest of world and write right-handed. I hope that we have put those days behind us.

I was sorry to hear the hon. Gentleman's story about the seven-year-old who was made to write with his right hand. Such a practice in our schools is totally unacceptable, and I hope that head teachers and others would act if a teacher ever made a child use a hand to write uncomfortably.

The list of famous people given by the hon. Gentleman partly defeats his own argument, as he cannot for a minute say that those left-handed people have not aspired to the greatest heights or achieved at the highest levels, or have not taken their place among the good and great.

In the past week—as I knew that I would have the honour of replying to the debate—I have asked everyone entering my office whether he or she is left-handed or right-handed. Initially, they gave me a strange look as—having come for a discussion on the national curriculum, for example—they did not know why they had to answer such a question. Nevertheless, I assure the hon. Gentleman that many people in the Department are left-handed. I am thinking of launching an inquiry into a conspiracy in the Department, whereby only left-handed people have been given the top jobs.

I think that the hon. Gentleman and I can agree that left-handed people have not been held back. As someone who is very keen on watching tennis, I have often wondered why so many tennis finalists, for example, are left-handers.

Left-handedness is an issue, and there is probably a genuine debate about how it should be addressed. I was please to hear the hon. Gentleman say that he no longer felt that it was a special need. He took that line in some of our earlier correspondence. However, I entirely accept that I did not realise the basis of his position. Nevertheless, I would not have advised him to take that line, and I think that he was right to abandon it.

Left-handedness is not a special need, for two reasons. The first is that it is a norm for a group of people and should be as acceptable as other physical or mental characteristics. Labelling would be wrong for those who are left-handed. We do not want to give left-handed people a greater hang-up than they might have already about being in a minority. Labelling sends its own messages.

Secondly, I feel very strongly—having seen many of those who truly have special educational needs—that left-handed people will always have difficulties in competing for resources or expertise against children with genuine SENs, who require an awful lot of resources. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for helping to establish that we should no longer think of left-handedness as an SEN.

We do not count how many children are left-handed. Moreover—amazingly—we do not count how many children have special educational needs. There is subsequently a difficulty—which will not apply to left-handedness—in defining various special educational needs. Left-handed people are not being discriminated against, because those numbers are not being kept.

The hon. Gentleman will see that there is hope in the documents that we published recently—building on work set in train by the previous Government; I seek no political edge in the matter—on teacher training, children's needs and the need to be conscious of children's differences. I am optimistic, and think that there is a hook—I do not use the word as he did—on which we can hang greater awareness of left-handed children.

We are not terribly prescriptive in any of the documents on standards for qualified teacher status or SEN co-ordinators published by the Department or the Teacher Training Agency. We never say, "This is how you've got

to look at dyslexic children or at autism." None of those conditions is mentioned in any of the documents that we have published.

I cannot promise to start including in documents statements that trainee teachers should be taught about left-handed children. However, I can give the hon. Gentleman hope that embedded in the documents will be instructions to teacher trainers that teachers must be able to identify the needs of individual children and know that children must be dealt with individually.

I expect all teachers to know which children in their classes are left-handed. The hon. Gentleman's comments on elbows were helpful. Teachers have to know who is left-handed so that they can arrange their classroom and offer children specialist equipment and other help.

The issues of left-handedness have been placed firmly in my mind in the past 12 months, and today's public debate has reiterated issues raised in the private debate that the hon. Gentleman and I have had. I can give him the undertaking that I will talk to the TTA. I cannot deliver on his request to require all student teachers to be made aware of the problems of left-handedness, but, once we have seen the video produced by the Post Office—for whose sponsorship I am grateful—and determine that it is of an acceptable quality, we shall be happy to distribute it to all providers of initial teacher training. I am sure that he will be happy to accept that caveat. Perhaps that will be a first step in putting the issues in the minds of the public—as he and his former constituent have put the issue in my mind.

In my discussions with those who have influence in the matter and who train teachers, I am prepared to ensure that left-handedness is not thought of as a special condition, as part of the SEN agenda or as something peculiar or odd. We should ensure that all teachers—in their work in the classroom of identifying the special characteristics of each of our children—bear in mind the fact that left-handedness is an important facet of some children and must be taken into account in planning lessons.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire for drawing the matter to my attention. As someone who writes very badly, though with my right hand, I had not given proper thought to it before. By correspondence and in his speech today, the hon. Gentleman has enabled me to give it more thought. If that helps children and raises standards, the debate will have been worth while.

Argentina

1.29 pm

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I begin by saying that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Argentina. It is a long time since the House debated the relationship between the United Kingdom and Argentina. Whatever problems may have existed between us in the past, I am delighted to say that the relationship is now excellent, and a wide range of activities takes place between our countries. I have no doubt that that relationship will be further enhanced by President Menem's official visit to the United Kingdom in October.

Contact between our two countries started long ago, and today many families living in Argentina can trace their roots back to the United Kingdom. Argentina is a large country. Its population is nearly 36 million. It is the second largest country in Latin America, and 10 times larger than the United Kingdom. In 1997, its economic growth was 8.4 per cent. For a number of years, it has followed policies of major economic reform, and its people and ours are pleased that it now has a thriving democracy, due to the policies of its Government and its President.

The normalisation of diplomatic and consular relations between our countries occurred in 1989–90. Since then, there have been many high-level visits. Argentina's Minister of Justice visited the United Kingdom and met the Lord Chancellor. Its Foreign Minister has met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and its Minister of Defence attended in London the first seminar on defence policy between our two countries.

The Lord Mayor of London has visited Argentina, as have the Minister of State, Department for Education and Employment, my noble Friend Baroness Blackstone, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport. Although there have been important exchange visits, those of us who take an interest in the economic developments in that country feel that real progress has been made in that respect.

Argentina is now the second most important Latin American market for the United Kingdom. In 1997, British exports to Argentina were worth more than $800 million, and it is one of the fastest growing markets for the United Kingdom. I pay the warmest tribute to the many major British companies that, by sheer hard work, have developed a market for a wide range of products. Without doubt, they have used their experience and know-how to develop trade with Argentina.

In addition, United Kingdom direct investment in the country has been most impressive. More than $2.13 billion was invested between 1990 and 1996. I am also delighted that, as British trade and investment in Argentina have developed enormously, equally, trade and investment from Argentina are increasing here. The range of British companies investing there is most impressive, and includes all our major industries. They all praise the helpfulness of both Governments in developing the range of investment opportunities.

It is also pleasing to note that, although Argentina is a long way from Europe, it continues to develop links with the European Union. It also fully supports and works for the liberalisation of internal trade, a matter which both Governments pursue and seek to develop. All those developments closely build on the existing links between us, to the benefit of the people of both countries.

[Mr. Tom Cox]

I mentioned the families who live in Argentina and can trace their links back over many years—in some cases, centuries—to the United Kingdom. I look to cultural and personal exchanges for further developments in culture, music, film, theatre and education. I hope that, in future, more young people will travel between our countries, and that the tourist trade will develop. Like the United Kingdom, Argentina is a beautiful country, with much to offer visitors. We all know that distance means very little these days. People visit countries throughout the world. I look to my hon. Friend, in his reply, to confirm that it is a future avenue of development between our countries.

I have already mentioned the problems between our countries in the past. Although there are differences concerning the Falkland Islands, they should be resolved by the two Governments and the people of the islands. In no way should they restrict the developments that I have already outlined.

I also mentioned President Menem's forthcoming visit to the United Kingdom in October. Bearing in mind Argentina's troubled past, he deserves enormous praise. He has led his country to the democracy that it now enjoys and protects, and he deserves great credit for that. He now travels to many countries throughout the world, and is always warmly received. I have no doubt that, when he makes his official Government visit to the United Kingdom, he will be warmly received here. His will be the first visit to the United Kingdom by an Argentine President since 1961, and he will be the official guest of the British Government. He will meet the Queen, the Prime Minister and other senior Ministers. He will address Members of both Houses of Parliament and meet a wide range of business people, undoubtedly seeking to develop trade and investment between our countries. His visit will build on the relationship that our two countries jealously seek to protect and develop.

Many hon. Members on both sides will join me in paying a warm tribute to His Excellency the Argentine ambassador—who, I am pleased to say, is in the House today—for all the work that he and his colleagues at the embassy do. He is a true friend of the United Kingdom, and has done a great deal to develop relations between our countries. I am sure that he will play a major role in the visit of President Menem in October.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I endorse what my hon. Friend has said about Rogelio Pfirter?

Mr. Cox: I welcome that endorsement. My hon. Friend has been in the House longer than I have and is held in the highest esteem by hon. Members on both sides. It is good that he has come to listen to the debate. I pay tribute to the role that he played when relations were different. He helped to build a relationship that our countries and our respective Parliaments welcome.

I am grateful for the opportunity to initiate this short debate. I have tried to outline the enormous improvements in relations between our two countries, and explain why they are so important. I should like to pay a final, well deserved tribute to His Excellency the ambassador and all his colleagues at the embassy.

1.42 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) on securing parliamentary time for this important debate on relations between the United Kingdom and Argentina, and the role of President Menem and his forthcoming visit.

It is appropriate that we are debating the subject today. I shall be visiting Buenos Aires in the next fortnight. However, the visit to Britain of President Menem later this year will be more important for our bilateral relations. As my hon. Friend has said, it is the first visit by an Argentine president for more than 30 years. That makes it an important landmark in relations between our countries.

The visit of President Menem sets the seal on the process, begun in 1989, of restoring the relationship between our two countries—a relationship that was broken by the Falklands war. The task of rebuilding the relationship has been made easier by our special ties of friendship, stretching back over two centuries, and the shared interests of the two countries. My hon. Friend mentioned Anglo-Argentine families who are proud of their British roots and of their Argentine status. We all applaud their role as the cement between our two countries. The warmth of our historical friendship emphasises how tragic the events of 1982 were.

It is appropriate that President Menem should be making his historic visit later this year. He began the process of reconciliation when he took power in 1989. One of his first acts as president was to lift the restrictions on trade with the United Kingdom. He deserves credit for recognising that our two countries have more to gain from working together than from maintaining the animosity that had been created by the war of 1982. He had to justify that brave decision to Argentine public opinion.

The president's decision led to the negotiations that created the so-called sovereignty umbrella—an arrangement by which we agreed to pursue issues of mutual interest without prejudicing either side's position on the sovereignty of the Falkland islands. In February 1990, less than a year after President Menem came to power, we reopened our embassies in our respective capitals. The relationship has gone from strength to strength ever since. I pay tribute to Ambassador Pfirter for his work on consolidating the relationship. He is well known to many hon. Members.

I shall talk in more detail later about the strength of our relationship, but first I must acknowledge the serious disagreement that remains in our relations with Argentina—over sovereignty over the Falklands. Argentina still disputes our claim. When we invited President Menem, we made it clear that the visit would not be an occasion to negotiate our sovereignty of the Falklands. Our position remains that we have no doubt about our sovereignty over the islands, and we remain fully committed to protecting the right of the Falkland islanders to determine their future.

There is no inconsistency between that and our real commitment to continue working with the Argentines on all other aspects of our relationship. There is no better example of that process than the progress on the sustainability of resources in the south Atlantic. We all gain from mutual co-operation. Co-operation in the south Atlantic fisheries commission has helped to conserve and manage important fish stocks.

We have an agreement for co-operation on hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation that benefits all parties. The meeting of the South-west Atlantic Hydrocarbons Commission in Buenos Aires next week will be an important opportunity for both sides to continue our work on the preparation of a licensing round on the special co-operation area, which would have been unimaginable not many years ago. However, we shall also register our concerns about the draft legislation before the Argentine Congress, which threatens our interests in the exploration for and possible exploitation of oil in the south Atlantic.

When I visited the Falkland islands earlier this year, I told members of the Legislative Council that everyone applauded their maturity and decency in allowing the next of kin of Argentines who died in the Falklands to visit the Argentine graves on the island. I visited the Argentine cemetery. I also took the opportunity to encourage the council and other islanders to consider broadening their range of contacts with Argentina. That process of reconciliation and the development of mutual understanding would be helped by more interaction between the two communities. That would not compromise the sovereignty of the Falklands.

There is much that is positive in Britain's relations with Argentina. The Argentine and British Governments intend to ensure that the president's visit is a celebration of all that is good in our relationship—and there is much to celebrate. Had my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting not mentioned democracy in Argentina, I would not have mentioned it—but not because democracy is not precious either in this country or in Argentina. Although I would never say that we take democracy for granted—anywhere—I would take for granted the fact that democracy in Argentina is well rooted and no longer subject to the questions of 15 years ago.

Argentina is committed to the achievement of genuine global free trade. A mark of its economic standing is its application to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which Britain fully supports. Reform has been just as evident in the political sphere. The anti-western, non-aligned rhetoric of the past has disappeared, and, for some years, Argentina has been playing an important role on the world stage.

I hope that hon. Members will have noticed that, when the Group of Eight Foreign Ministers recently invited a small group of other countries to join them to discuss efforts to co-ordinate the response to nuclear testing in India and Pakistan, Argentina was one of them. That was not an accident; it was recognition of the part that Argentina has played in helping to restrain the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil led the way to the abandonment of nuclear development on the Latin American continent, and made South America a genuine nuclear-free part of the world.

In British eyes, Argentina is now firmly established as a close and trusted ally in many of the global issues of importance today, including on Iraq. Argentina is a major contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations. British troops and Argentine troops serve side by side in several locations. In fact, in Cyprus, British troops serve under an Argentine general, whose appointment we gladly supported. That speaks volumes for the distance that we have travelled together.

I turn to trade and investment. My hon. Friend paid tribute to the efforts of business people of both countries in improving relationships, which I mirror. From virtually nothing in 1989, Argentina has become our second largest market in Latin America—ahead of Mexico and Chile. In 1997, it was one of our fastest growing markets anywhere in the world, taking £500 million-worth of British goods.

Along with Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay, Argentina is a member of MERCOSUR, the common market of the southern cone, which is now the fourth largest trading bloc in the world. The export forum has identified it as one of the target areas for the UK. We have also been active in the European Union in promoting greater co-operation between our two regions.

British investment in financial and other services, as well as in manufacturing, has also been making impressive headway in Argentina. There is a long history of British companies investing in Argentina. People of my generation grew up with stories not only of British-led railway investment, but of the future of football being a product of it. Perhaps this year we have some cause to regret such investment. The long history of investment has recently been matched by spectacular change, and some significant newcomers.

It is difficult to give absolutely accurate figures for investment, but we estimate that, between 1990 and 1996, British investment in Argentina was worth between US$2 billion and US$3 billion, and that a further US$3 billion will be invested by the turn of the century.

The list of active players in the market reads like a "Who's Who" of British industry. My hon. Friend mentioned some significant names, and I shall mention some others. They include British Gas, the National Grid Company, Glaxo Wellcome, Reckitt and Colman, Cadbury Schweppes, Lloyds bank, which has invested in Argentina without a break since 1862, P and O, Pilkington, Imperial Chemical Industries, HSBC, Shell, United Utilities, Sun Alliance, Zeneca, Johnson Matthey, Rolls-Royce/Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. All those, and many others which have perhaps not had the same exposure, have seen the potential of the Argentine market and have moved in.

The climate for such impressive investment is an Argentine economy that, under the present Government, has conquered hyper-inflation and achieved significant levels of stability and growth in recent years. The House became aware of the tequila crisis of 1995, which moved south in Latin America, hitting the Argentine and other economies in the region very hard.

The speed of the recovery was impressive; the fact that mattered was not that the crisis had an impact, but that the economy was robust enough to withstand such a shock. Perhaps more significant, the lessons of that event have enabled the country so far to weather the storm of the Asian crisis with something to spare. That shows the strength of Argentina. It is worth noting that, since 1991, the Argentine economy has averaged growth of 6.1 per cent. against average inflation of under 1 per cent. since 1995, which must be some world record.

My hon. Friend mentioned the long list of official visitors we have received—and, indeed, those who have gone from Britain to Argentina. The list is impressive in its own right, and is significant testimony to the increasingly strong and vibrant relationship between our two nations and Governments. The Government hope—

[Mr. Tony Lloyd]

we speak for the House and the country—that the visit of President Menem will be a chance for us to take a major step forward in promoting the important relationship. We and the Argentine Government are hoping to agree on a range of specific areas in which we can work together to our mutual advantage. That is one of the great advantages of a presidential visit.

I turn, as my hon. Friend did, to the future. He is right to say that our relationship with Argentina is based strongly in the past; it has been strong for hundreds of years, but since the late 1980s, it has become increasingly powerful. The figures that he and I have cited show just how powerful that relationship is—in economic terms as well as in international co-operation and bilateral exchange. I echo several of my hon. Friend's points.

I may sound a little like the Argentine tourist board, but Argentina is a spectacularly beautiful country. I look forward to going there in a couple of weeks. Its natural resources are enormous. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress that, as a location for tourists, it offers great potential. In our ever smaller world, it is almost inconceivable that Europeans will not join the many north Americans who already travel there. I should say in passing, firmly putting my British hat on again, that we would welcome a significant increase in the number of Argentines who choose to visit Britain, which has many advantages too.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): The flights are very expensive.

Mr. Lloyd: Although what my hon. Friend says is true, there has been significant progress on the issue of air routes. Frequency of air services, which encourages the necessary competition, and economies of scale will bring the prices down. We ought to see the benefit of cheaper air services as exchanges increase.

Perhaps the most important comment that my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting made concerned young people. The relationship between the two countries is based not only on trade but on a firm commitment to shared values and culture.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I am certainly very interested in the interaction between universities of both countries. Young people who study in another country gain a love for it that stays with them throughout their lives. I hope that the Minister confirms that the link between universities will be a significant item on the agenda for discussion with President Menem and his advisers later in the year.

Mr. Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Given that Argentina's Foreign Minister has a distinguished academic record in the British university system, and continues to play an active role in that sphere, the exchange of students must be high on the agenda of us all. It is through such exchange that we embrace each other's values. We need to work together—country to country, people to people—to increase trade as well as understanding.

The Government believe very firmly that Britain and Argentina have, over the past nine years, found a way to build on the positive part of our relationship without letting our obvious differences intrude unnecessarily. We hope to continue that process; we will both work hard in that direction. We both have much to gain from it. The visit of President Menem in October will significantly enhance that process. As the architect of the reconciliation process that allowed us to embark on the revitalisation of our relationship, he will be a most welcome visitor.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

City of Edinburgh (Guided Busways) Order Confirmation Bill

Read the Third time, and passed.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Community Hospitals

1. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): What representations he has received concerning the closure of community hospitals in Wales. [50267]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): Since 1 May 1997, I have received a number of representations about proposals by health authorities for the closure of hospitals in Wales, including an Adjournment debate last Thursday initiated by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). Such proposals are the responsibility of health authorities and are referred to me for decision only if they cannot be agreed with the local community health council. To date, I have received no such referrals.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister will be aware of the strength of the opposition from both health care professionals and patients in Powys to the proposed merger of the Powys Health Care NHS trust and the Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS trust, because of fears that the merger would inevitably lead to the closure of community hospitals. He will also be aware of the level of expectations raised throughout the country by the Chancellor's much hyped announcement last week of additional resources for the national health service.

If Labour's manifesto commitment to save the NHS in Wales is to mean anything to the people of Powys, will the Minister give the House an assurance that the saving of the community hospital-based system in Powys will an absolute priority in the spending of the additional NHS funds allocated to Wales? Will he confirm that, as a result of that extra money, none of the community hospitals in Powys will close?

Mr. Griffiths: The reconfiguration of the trusts in Wales will make more money available for patient care in Powys and Ceredigion, and everywhere else, so the two issues of community hospitals and of trust reconfiguration have nothing to do with one another. I confirm that the extra money provided for the health service in Wales by the Chancellor will be spent on ensuring that we have a better health service throughout Wales.

As for community hospitals, I will await proposals to see whether there are disagreements. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that in Tenby an agreement has already been made whereby the community hospital is to close, but other provision has been agreed by all concerned.

I am confident about what will happen in Powys and Ceredigion—and, by the way, there is widespread support in Ceredigion for the trust reconfiguration proposal. I certainly hope that there will be a proposal for Powys and Ceredigion that will provide better care for everybody.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): May I remind my hon. Friend of two excellent local hospitals, Meadowslea and Dobshill, in my constituency, which he has not yet visited, and about which there are rumours of closure? Does he agree that those hospitals have a wonderful record? Will he please visit them? Is it not the case that, now that the Chancellor has made money available, there should be no need for rumours of closure?

Mr. Griffiths: I assure my hon. Friend that I certainly shall make an effort to visit those two hospitals in the near future. I have heard nothing about rumours of closure and I reassure him that the extra money provided by the Chancellor will ensure that there will be a better health service in Wales in the coming years and, as long as there is a Labour Government, that will continue.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Does the Minister agree that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) was preaching a lot of humbug, because it was his party that first put the skids under the idea of closing community hospitals?

When the Minister receives an objective report from Dr. Robert Maxwell of the King's Fund which recommends that community hospitals in Powys remain open and that there is no amalgamation of the Ceredigion trust, will he take note of those recommendations and act positively on them?

Mr. Griffiths: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman's first question—I have no problem with that. I underscore the fact that the trust reconfiguration exercise has absolutely nothing to do with the future of community hospitals. The additional money that the exercise will produce will make it more, rather than less, likely that community hospitals will survive. I look forward to reading the Maxwell report commissioned by Powys Action for Patients, but we must await the outcome of the consultation before any final decisions are made.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): In view of the substantial extra resources now to be devoted to the health service—5 per cent. extra in real terms for the next three years—is there not an overwhelming case for all health authorities to reconsider any closure plans and the Government's policy of halting the steep decline in the number of hospital beds? We need the beds, we need the hospitals, and we now have a Government who are providing the resources to sustain them.

Mr. Griffiths: I assure my hon. Friend that the Chancellor's decision to provide additional money for three years ahead will give health authorities and everyone in the health service the chance properly to plan for the provision of health care. I am confident that health authorities, trusts and all those involved in providing health care will be grateful for that extra money, and will use it wisely to promote and enhance patient care.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister recall that the Madog community hospital in Porthmadog was closed on the basis that there would be a new community hospital in that town and that, when a delegation met him to discuss that point, he made it clear that it was a matter for the North Wales health authority and the Gwynedd Community Health NHS trust? Now that the health authority and the community trust have

supported the idea of a new hospital and the Minister has an abundance of new money available, will he give the go-ahead for that hospital?

Mr. Griffiths: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that there is an abundance of new money available, thanks to the Chancellor. We shall consider the proposal for the right hon. Gentleman's constituency when it is put before us. I am pleased that there is at last agreement. We must now consider the best way of making sure that the hospital is provided.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): Is my hon. Friend aware of the tremendous support and affection for the Mardy hospital in Merthyr? Will he reassure the House that, if the proposal to close the hospital is pushed through, the new community hospital that has been proposed will be built?

Mr. Griffiths: My hon. Friend will know that I visited the Mardy hospital, and I well appreciate the difficulties for staff operating from there in providing high-quality care for patients. I do not want to comment specifically on a possible closure or replacement, but I would want to be absolutely sure that, in the event of any closures, there would be proper provision in Merthyr Tydfil and the North Glamorgan NHS trust area.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): All parties in the House understand the need to obtain value for money in health care; but, having worked as a doctor in community hospitals, I know that the value of community hospitals has to be measured in more than simply economic terms. Would it not be money well spent to keep local people in a local environment, within easy access of families, transport and support? What assessment has the Minister made of the average cost per day per bed in community hospitals compared with that in acute units in Wales?

Mr. Griffiths: First, I assure the hon. Gentleman that, as someone who, as a child, spent some time in the Brecon war memorial hospital, I am well aware of the good service provided by community hospitals. It would not take a genius to know that care in a community hospital costs far less per bed than in an acute general or district hospital. Community hospitals have a valuable role to play and I want to be sure that, throughout Wales, facilities in general and district hospitals and in community hospitals are properly interlinked.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his announcement of no less than £1 billion extra for health spending in Wales. Does he agree that tackling the chronic levels of ill health in Wales requires a strategic approach, and that the pledge of extra money will go a long way towards committing money for that strategy?

Mr. Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend for that observation and question. In addition to the extra money, we have also developed a strategy to raise health standards in our "Better Health—Better Wales" Green Paper. We want to tackle the causes of bad health as well as treating it. The money will surely help us to raise health standards in Wales.

Millennium Compliance (Hospitals)

2. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What representations he has received concerning the millennium computer bug in hospitals in Wales. [50268]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): None, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Swayne: How many mission-critical systems affect life and death, and what guarantee can the Minister give that those systems will function securely after the millennium?

Mr. Hain: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest in the matter and thank him for raising it. We are taking the matter much more seriously than the previous Conservative Government. We have already issued four NHS circulars to trust and health authority chief executives, we are establishing an NHS steering group, and we shall be tackling the matter as best we can to ensure compliance as early as possible in 1999.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Audit Commission's report on the progress of public bodies in tackling the millennium bug problem has been described as "chilling", and the Government's reaction to it as "astonishingly complacent", as evidenced by Labour Members' lack of interest in asking a supplementary question on the matter. As the cost of tackling the millennium problem in the NHS has been estimated at between £230 million and £850 million, and the average information technology spend within the NHS each year is about £100 million, from where will the extra money come to ensure that the life-saving equipment necessary to keep hospitals functioning will be working effectively after 1 January?

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the life-saving issues at stake in the NHS, but why, when we took office, had virtually nothing been done by the Conservative Government to tackle the problem? We have put in place a series of systematic measures, rigorously tracked through by Ministers and health officials, to ensure that there is full compliance in the health service by 2000, and earlier if possible.

Countryside Policies

3. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on his policies for the countryside. [50269]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): I am committed to policies that conserve the countryside within a sustainable development framework that will improve economic, social and environmental conditions for the people of Wales.

Sir Sydney Chapman: When does the Secretary of State expect to publish the separate White Paper on an integrated transport policy for Wales as foreshadowed in the White Paper on the future of transport, published earlier this week? Will he assure the House that it will

address the distinct and different needs for public transport services in the Welsh countryside and, in particular, the need for better bus services?

Mr. Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his genuine and obvious interest in the problems of rural transport. On Friday, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), intends to publish the Government's proposals for the development of such an integrated transport system in Wales—I shall arrange for the hon. Gentleman to receive a copy.

I very much understand the case for developing distinctive policies in the countryside; if we are to have integrated transport systems for the whole country, we must reflect the particular needs of the countryside. The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made £50 million available in the Budget specifically to improve mobility in the countryside. In Wales, the greater part of the money will be spent on the development of new and improved bus services, but there will also be small-scale imaginative projects to develop informal transport links for the remotest communities.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): It is astonishing that no Labour Back Bencher stood up to express interest in countryside issues in Wales. What policies will the Secretary of State introduce to ensure that new entrants can gain access to farming in Wales? Does he understand farmers' anxiety about the next generation's prospects of gaining access to the land? What positive news can he give them other than sympathy, which pays no wages?

Mr. Davies: Most of my hon. Friends were at the royal Welsh show in Builth Wells earlier this week, where they had the opportunity to talk at first hand to countryside people about the problems facing the countryside. In direct answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, it has never been my intention to offer sympathy to the people of the working countryside in Wales; I have always made it clear to them that I understand—and shall work with them to try to resolve—the problems.

I give the hon. Gentleman a list of our achievements over the past 15 months. We have ensured that the end of the beef ban is now in sight, and I remind him that the Conservative Government were responsible for the waste of billions of pounds of public money and the collapse of the beef industry through their failure to tackle the problems of bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

We have introduced new initiatives, including a food promotion policy and schemes to implement agri-environmental policies. We are consulting on the restructuring of the agricultural community, and we are considering how hill livestock compensatory allowances can be reorganised. The hon. Gentleman will understand that a new vibrancy is afoot in the Welsh countryside; Welsh farmers and others who work in the countryside know that, in Labour, they have a Government they can trust.

NHS Trusts (Reorganisation)

4. **Mr. Llew Smith** (Blaenau Gwent): If he will make a statement on proposals for the reorganisation of health trusts in Wales. [50270]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): Public consultation on proposals to reduce the number of national health trusts in Wales from 26 to 15 started on 22 June and will end on 21 September. Copies of the relevant consultation documents have been issued to hon. Members who represent constituencies in Wales and have also been placed in the Library of the House. Final decisions on the proposals will be taken later this year, after we have fully considered all responses to the consultation.

Mr. Smith: Will my hon. Friend explain why he proposes in his consultation document on health trusts in Wales that the health trust to serve my constituency will cover a population of some 550,000, together with people in the catchment areas of Herefordshire and south Powys, whereas the health trust to serve his constituency will cover a population almost half that number? Is he not worried that, in this year when we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the national health service, he is considering implementing proposals that almost no one in my constituency—which can rightly claim to be the birthplace of the NHS—supports?

Mr. Griffiths: On the size of the new NHS trusts—if they are approved after consultation—the proposal for one trust for Gwent and for two for Iechyd Morgannwg were drawn up by the health authorities after wide consultation in their areas; moreover, that proposal, which I consider reasonable, is being put forward for wider public consultation. I believe that, at this stage, the one-trust option in Gwent offers the greatest savings, which will provide more money for health care in Gwent. It will also enable a much better match between local authority social services departments and the NHS in Gwent.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): How many representations has the Minister received opposing the reorganisation of health trusts in Wales?

Mr. Griffiths: Across Wales, remarkably few. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the exact number, but I am quite prepared to provide that in writing and to put a copy of that answer in the House of Commons Library. I have had quite a few representations from Gwent, Powys and Llanelli, but not that many from elsewhere in Wales.

NHS Trust (North Gwent)

5. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): What representations he has received concerning the case for a separate NHS trust for north Gwent. [50271]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): The Welsh Office has received 13 representations in respect of a separate trust for north Gwent since public consultation started on proposals to establish a single NHS trust to serve the Gwent health authority area on 22 June. Before the consultation, I received more than 50 individual representations from hon. Friends and other interested parties, as well as petitions signed by 26 hospital consultants and more than 4,000 members of the general public.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for agreeing to meet a delegation that will include me and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) tomorrow morning, when he will receive the compelling case for having a separate trust for north Gwent. That would ensure greater accountability of health services in north Gwent and maintain the integrity of Nevill Hall hospital as a district general hospital. When my hon. Friend receives that evidence, will he give serious consideration to having a separate trust for north Gwent?

Mr. Griffiths: I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent and other community representatives tomorrow and to reading the detailed proposal for a two-trust option. However, there is no danger whatsoever of services at Nevill Hall hospital being adversely affected by the one-trust proposal. When considering proposals for the Gwent health authority area, I shall be looking at which proposal of all the ones available to me is likely to provide the best health service and more money for patient care.

Scottish Universities

6. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): How many Welsh students currently attend universities in Scotland. [50274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): In 1997–98, there were 602 Welsh-domiciled students studying at Scottish higher education institutions.

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that some of those students will be constituents of the Minister and I suspect that they will be unhappy should they have to pay the extra year's tuition fees. May I quote what the Minister's right hon. Friend Lord Callaghan of Cardiff said? He is a man who has spent rather more time in Wales than the Minister, who had to hawk himself around the Labour party bazaars of England before coming to rest in Neath. Of the compromise that has been reached, Lord Callaghan said:

"the Government are morally bound to accept all the major conclusions that follow from it."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 123.]

I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind and put it to his constituents if they come to him about having to pay that extra year's tuition fees.

Mr. Hain: You will forgive me, I am sure, Madam Speaker, if I refer in passing to the fact that the hon. Gentleman has not asked a single question in that respect about English students, or about his own constituents; so it is clearly not a problem for them. In fact, the number of applications from Wales to Scottish institutions is up this year. The principle involved is that we are providing a fairer system of funding for all students in Britain, which will give greater opportunity and greater access to higher education.

A55

7. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones** (Ynys Môn): When he expects work to commence on the A55 road across Anglesey. [50275]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): Tenders for the scheme have been received and are under consideration. The contract is expected to be let in the autumn, with completion three years later, on schedule.

Mr. Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. He will know that there has been intense speculation in the press about whether the autumn start date will be met. At the last general election, there was all-party support in Anglesey for the view that that road project should start, given the enormous problems of traffic across the island. Will the Minister give an assurance that, when the tenders are in and the contractor approved, work on the road will start in the autumn?

Mr. Hain: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and his continuing interest in the matter. I assure him that we agree with him 100 per cent., which is why this road project was the only one excluded from the review of Welsh roads. We are committed to it as a priority. The tenders are now being considered in their final stages and the contract will be let in the autumn. Work will begin as quickly as possible thereafter and we will stick to our completion date of 2001 under the contract as planned.

Agri-environmental Scheme

8. **Mr. Cynog Dafis** (Ceredigion): When he intends to publish his proposals for an all-Wales agri-environmental scheme. [50276]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), gave a progress report on the all-Wales agri-environment scheme at the Royal Welsh show in Builth Wells yesterday.

Mr. Dafis: Does the Secretary of State accept that the support of farmers is absolutely essential if the tir gofal scheme is to work? Does he accept also that, if the resources provided for expanding the scheme are insufficient and large numbers of farmers are turned down, it will cause great disenchantment and disappointment? Does he agree that those in Wales who are most seriously committed to the agri-environmental system strongly oppose a ranking system based on the supposed ecological value of the farm as a condition for entry into the scheme? Will the Secretary of State agree to consider adding a tier within the scheme for organic farming, bearing in mind the fact that that would have considerable benefits for the market and for the price that farmers in it would get for their produce?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman has asked five questions and I will not attempt to answer them all in detail. There is an organic conversion scheme in operation and it will continue to exist alongside the tir gofal scheme. A broad welcome for tir gofal was expressed to me at the Royal Welsh show on Monday. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that we must ensure continuing support for the farming community. That is why my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and I are consulting widely with farmers.

On resources, in September we will produce in Wales a document setting out our priorities as a result of the comprehensive spending review. I shall obviously do

what I can to ensure that the scheme is funded properly. On ranking, it is an important principle that the schemes that offer best value for money, and therefore the best environmental enhancement, receive the highest priority.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that his proposals assist the farmers of the vale of Glamorgan in their endeavours to maintain the environment and the countryside in the face of a drop in farm incomes caused by the dreadful policies of the previous Government over the past five years?

Mr. Davies: The scheme is important, because it will bring environmental benefits. It will also help to provide an alternative income stream for farmers who, as my hon. Friend said, have been hard hit over the past couple of years. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I am discussing with my officials and the farming unions the best way of ensuring that all the counties of Wales have an opportunity to have schemes in their areas, if only for exemplary purposes to spread the message that good farming is compatible with the best environmental practice.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The Secretary of State presumes that farmers will survive, but some farms have lost 80 per cent. of their income. When will the Secretary of State wake up to the real crisis in Welsh farming and react accordingly?

Mr. Davies: I do not presume that, and I am working hard to ensure that it does not happen.

Powys and Ceredigion NHS Trusts

9. **Mr. Lembit Öpik** (Montgomeryshire): What account he will take of public opinion in formulating his proposals on the future of the Powys Health Care NHS trust and Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS trust. [50272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): Consultation is currently taking place on a proposal to merge the Powys Health Care and Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS trusts. Consultation ends on 21 September and it is only after that time that my right hon. Friend and I will make a decision on the proposal, taking into account representations received.

Mr. Öpik: Will the Minister confirm my understanding of his earlier remark that he does not foresee the closure of any Powys hospital if an overwhelming majority of local people oppose that move? Will he confirm also that this is a genuine consultation process and that, if the overwhelming majority of people in Powys oppose the merger, he will respect their democratic will?

Mr. Griffiths: May I put the hon. Gentleman right on the issue of community hospitals? What I said very clearly is that no community hospital is threatened by the NHS trust reconfiguration proposal. With the money that the Chancellor has made available and the additional money that will be made available through the trust reconfiguration process, it is much more likely that community hospitals will prosper under Labour's proposals than under any others.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): When the Minister reorganises the Powys and Ceredigion health trusts, will he also make provision for top slicing, so that patients in mid-Wales who need heart transplant surgery will not have to go to London but will be able to go to the long-awaited heart transplant surgery centre in the University hospital of Wales in Cardiff?

Mr. Griffiths: As my hon. Friend knows, we are working hard with NHS health authorities in Wales to strengthen the cardiac service in the UHW so that in future patients in mid-Wales can travel to Cardiff rather than London.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1.[50297] **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 July.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Hughes: May I remind the Prime Minister of two pre-election Labour pledges, which are of interest to millions of people in London and beyond? The first was that a Labour Government would hold a public inquiry into the sinking of the Marchioness, with the loss of 51 lives; and the second was that Guy's hospital at London Bridge would be saved.

Now that the Government have been in office for 15 months, will the Prime Minister give an undertaking that a public inquiry will soon be announced, and that the plans that have just arrived on ministerial desks proposing the closure of the maternity and accident and emergency departments at Guy's hospital, and the halving of the number of beds from 700 to 350, will be rejected, and replaced with plans that save and strengthen Guy's hospital rather than threaten it?

The Prime Minister: First, in respect of the position in the hospitals, we shall study those plans very carefully indeed and ensure that any commitments that we come up with are consistent with proper health care in London. We shall be putting a substantial extra sum of money into health care in London. Secondly, in respect of the Marchioness, it would not be right for me to comment until an announcement has been made, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

Q2.[50298] **Angela Smith** (Basildon): Is the Prime Minister aware of the strong approval around the world for the British Government's actions in supporting the setting up of the International Criminal Court as the only way to deal with the perpetrators of war crimes and international atrocities, including disasters such as Lockerbie? Will he take every opportunity to try to persuade those Governments, such as the Chinese and United States Governments, who have not yet signed up to do so as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: We warmly welcome the agreement in Rome last week to establish the International

Criminal Court. We believe that the court will be an effective, credible and independent body that is able to bring to justice those charged with international crimes.

In respect of Lockerbie, about which there has been a lot of discussion in the press, I shall simply say that it has long been a priority of this Government to bring to trial the two Libyans accused of responsibility for the Lockerbie tragedy. It has been our wish that the trial should take place in Scotland or the United States, and I totally reject the claim that there would be any difficulty in holding a fair trial in Scotland.

Because no progress has been made, we are prepared to look at alternative ways of giving the families the justice that they deserve. That is why we launched discussions with the United States, and more recently with the Dutch, about the possibility of trial in a third country. However, there are many, many legal and other complexities to be overcome before we can be sure that that is the right way to proceed. Until those issues are resolved, no final decision can be made, but we have been working on the matter thoroughly over a long period. We must ensure that any solution that we come up with is fully consistent with our absolute commitment to the integrity of the Scottish judicial system.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): After all the promises before the election and all the hype since, is it not now clear that the Deputy Prime Minister's transport White Paper is a complete dog's breakfast? Is not the truth that it is elderly people and low-income motorists—people who are only just able to pay for a car and people who cannot afford an increase in the cost of using their car—who will be hit hardest by the new taxes that he has proposed, with no guarantee that they will receive any benefits in return?

The Prime Minister: I have to say that the Conservatives' attack on the possibility of congestion charges and taxes reaches new heights of opportunism and hypocrisy, even for them. Let me quote from the April 1996 document put out by the right hon. Gentleman's Government, when he was a member of the Cabinet:

"local authorities are to take the main role in deciding the right strategies for their areas, they have to have sufficient tools for the job. These might include powers to restrain traffic by local licensing measures or electronic charging . . . or powers aimed at reducing the provision of off-street non-residential parking."

It went on:

"The Government will therefore discuss with the Local Authority Associations . . . with a presumption in favour of introducing legislation in due course".

We are taking forward precisely the work that his Government did, and our plans for pensioners and for rural transport will help, not harm, those on low incomes.

Mr. Hague: And I have to say that it is time that the Prime Minister started answering questions in the House about his policy and the policy that he wants to pursue. He talks about rural transport; the Government have announced £50 million for it, after taking hundreds of millions of pounds out of the pockets of rural motorists in the Chancellor's past two Budgets. On Monday, the Deputy Prime Minister, who is not here—presumably his bus is running late—told school-run mothers, people struggling home with their weekly shopping and people living in the countryside that they were making unnecessary journeys. Then he jumped into his car and was driven 200 yards to the office.

Will the Prime Minister at least give a clear answer to this question: can he guarantee that he will not permit new taxes on motorists to be imposed until viable transport alternatives are in place, rather than only talked about?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely in order to do that that we have announced the plans that we have. What is more, those plans are £1.8 billion-worth of extra public investment in transport, over and above Conservative plans. As for what the right hon. Gentleman says about the rises in fuel duty, might I remind him that five sixths of that rise was imposed by his Government? I know that he would like to pretend that the 18 years of the Conservative Government never existed, but they did. As he well knows, it is the grossest opportunism to claim that we are introducing charges and taxes when all that we are introducing is permission for local authorities to experiment with them, in precisely the same way that the Government whom he supported wanted them to do.

Mr. Hague: After all that, the Prime Minister has still not answered the question. Will he make sure that no new taxes are imposed until viable alternative transport is in place? He talks about £1.8 billion of extra expenditure; the total extra new money announced by the Chancellor last week for public transport was £22 million, not £1.8 billion. How will he explain to people around the country—school-run mothers, people who take their shopping home in their car and people in the countryside—why they are paying billions of pounds of extra taxes and getting nothing in return?

The Prime Minister: First of all, in relation to the right hon. Gentleman's nonsense about school-run mothers, let me remind him that the Deputy Prime Minister said that, if we can provide better public transport, more people will be able to use it, which is why we are putting the extra £1.8 billion into it.

It was interesting that the right hon. Gentleman appeared to be attacking us for not spending enough on transport. He is nodding now. I know that the Conservative party does not keep any policy for long, but yesterday he was telling us that our spending plans were dangerous and irresponsible. The shadow Chancellor nods.

So far, the Opposition health and education spokesman has said that it is not enough. The defence spokesman has said that we are cutting defence spending, and that he wants more. The agriculture spokesman wants more, and the shadow Home Secretary wants more. In the interests of further public debate, let the right hon. Gentleman come to the Dispatch Box and tell us which part of the spending plans he disagrees with. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must quieten down.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I trust that the Prime Minister will not send me for an early bath if I raise again the subject of football, which has so recently preoccupied the nation. Will he ensure that the £120 million of public lottery money that was supposed

to purchase the Wembley site for the new national stadium will be safeguarded by the English National Stadium Trust, and that the money will not be used as a short-term interest-free loan to subsidise the Football Association?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that we shall ensure that the money is used wisely, in the interests of football.

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Ashdown.

Hon. Members: Oh no.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I am grateful for hon. Members' good wishes. That is how things should be.

This time last week, the Prime Minister told me that the total increase in real-terms investment in health and education that he had promised would be delivered, whatever the economic situation. I use his words. Two hours later, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that, if inflation went up by more than his forecast, the real-terms increase in spending on schools and hospitals would fall below the amount that he had promised. Which is true?

The Prime Minister: It is entirely right to say that the amount that we have set out is a three-year spending settlement. The money will be delivered and guaranteed—and, in fact, the Chancellor said precisely that in the evidence that he gave.

Mr. Ashdown: The Chancellor said precisely that, if inflation went up beyond his forecast, the budgets would stay the same, which means that value diminishes. The position is simple: a 1 per cent. increase above the Chancellor's forecast means £5 billion less for health and education. The Prime Minister must answer this question: is it not the case that, if his forecasts are wrong, schools and hospitals will pay the price?

The Prime Minister: We have based the figures on our own forecasts, which is the sensible thing for a Government to do. The right hon. Gentleman is saying that we should guarantee extra sums over and above that. We have entered into commitments for additional spending on health and education. Of course they were based on what we forecast will happen to the economy; that is sensible and prudent. What would be foolish would be to guarantee an extra £5 billion, which is what the right hon. Gentleman wants us to do.

As I reminded the right hon. Gentleman earlier, the actual amount that we are putting into schools and hospitals is substantially more than the Liberal Democrats ever asked for. I am beginning to think that we have reached the point at which, whatever sum we come up with, the Liberal Democrats will say that it is not enough. That may be the world of the Liberal Democrats, but it is not the real world.

United Nations

Q3.[50299] **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): When he last met President Clinton to discuss matters relating to the funding of peacekeeping operations and human rights programmes currently being undertaken by the United Nations.

The Prime Minister: We attach great importance to the proper funding of all United Nations operations. We have made clear to our United States colleagues our view that the United States should pay its arrears and future contributions promptly, in full and without conditions. I welcome President Clinton's commitment, in his State of the Union Address, to solving the problem of the US arrears.

Dr. Godman: May I remind the Prime Minister that some of the world's poorest countries are owed money by the United Nations for their peacekeeping work, and that that is a direct result of Congress's obdurate refusal to sanction the payment of the $1.1 billion that is owed by America to the UN? When will European leaders—including the Prime Minister—stand up to those people on Capitol Hill? Should they not be told, "You must pay up, or risk losing your voting rights"? That may be easier for me to say than the Prime Minister, but someone must tell the Americans that they must pay up in the interests of millions of people in poor countries.

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to say that, among my many and varied responsibilities, responsibility for the American Congress is not one, and I am thankful for that most of the time. We have done everything that we can. We have constantly pressed the United States but, to be fair to President Clinton, he agrees that the US should pay its arrears. As my hon. Friend implied, the problem is with the US Congress.

We must keep up the pressure on America to pay its arrears and to make its contributions. It is in all our interests internationally that the US stays engaged. We shall make progress as fast as we can—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the anti-American tendency on the Conservative Back Benches will allow me to continue. We shall make progress as fast as we can, but Britain is not able to make the US pay its contributions.

Engagements

Q4.[50300] **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): The Prime Minister has just confirmed to the House that the Government guarantee their cash spending plans for the next three years. If, as most economists expect, economic growth and revenues are lower than the Chancellor has forecast, will the Government increase borrowing or taxation?

The Prime Minister: We are entirely confident in our assumptions. I assume that the hon. Gentleman is opposed to the additional spending that we have proposed.

Mr. Flight *indicated dissent.*

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is in favour of that. I remind the House that, just before the election, he said:

"State pensions should be privatised and other forms of personal insurance, such as sickness and unemployment benefit, transferred to the private sector."

That may be his desire, but it is not the desire of the overwhelming majority of the British people.

Q5.[50301] **Dr. Howard Stoate** (Dartford): Before entering the House, I was a full-time NHS general practitioner. One of the main complaints that I received from doctors, nurses and patients was that the treatment available depended more on where people lived than on what was wrong with them. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that the wide-ranging changes proposed for the NHS will end the postcode care lottery once and for all?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We have put a substantial amount of extra money into the national health service to give it the investment that it needs, coupled with the reform that it also needs. One of those reforms is to get rid of the Tory internal market and to devote those resources to health care. Another is to end the two-tier nature of the health service.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will today announce that we shall agree to the main recommendation in the third report of the Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee that the annual intake of students to medical schools in the United Kingdom should be increased by 1,000. He told the Select Committee on Health that the, as yet unvalidated, figures for June show a further fall in waiting lists of 20,000. I hope that people will now realise that the national health service has the future that it needs and deserves under the new Labour Government.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): There is growing consensus among independent forecasters, whom the Prime Minister has just tried to brush aside, that the Chancellor's growth forecasts are optimistic. In the light of that, does not the Government's decision, which the right hon. Gentleman has just confirmed, to lock themselves into spending increases of £110 billion—it is their total loss of control of the social security budget to which we are opposed—look increasingly like a reckless gamble with jobs and prosperity?

The Prime Minister: I said that it was odd that the Opposition change policy in a day. They have now changed it in 10 minutes. Now the right hon. Gentleman is against the spending proposals. All the 44 independent forecasts show that, on any of those forecasts, we would meet our golden rules. Under this Government, we shall have a current account in surplus, as opposed to deficit under the Tories. We shall get the debt to GDP ratio down and, as opposed to the £27 billion of borrowing that we inherited from him, we shall have cut that to near zero.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister also knows that the budget will not be in balance at any point of the economic cycle, according to the Chancellor's forecasts; that the Treasury now admits that its forecasts are more optimistic than the average of 27 leading City forecasters; that the new president of the Confederation of British Industries says that we are heading for higher taxes—*[Interruption.]* They like listening to the CBI when it suits them but not when it does not suit them. Salomon Brothers Investment bank says:

"The golden economy left by the last Government is becoming the sick man of Europe."

Ernst and Young says that the Chancellor's plans will make it impossible to cut interest rates in the next 18 months. Does the Prime Minister remember that one of his early pledges was to keep interest rates as low as possible? Does he now realise that he has made that impossible, and is that not yet another early pledge that he has abandoned early?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not agree with that at all. First, the actual forecasts upon which our figures are based are the low end of the forecast. They are entirely and precisely in line with the CBI forecast on growth. As for interest rates going up, yes, they have had to go up since the election because we inherited an economy with inflation back in the system and heading for the days that we had under the Conservatives of 15 per cent. interest rates and boom and bust.

The right hon. Gentleman failed to answer the questions on spending. Perhaps he will now answer this question when he rises to the Dispatch Box. For over a year, the Tories have failed to tell us whether they support the independence of the Bank of England or oppose it, and whether they would have raised interest rates at all since the election. Perhaps, in the interests of debate, we can now have an answer to those questions.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister, in one of those bland assertions that he makes at the Dispatch Box, says that the Government forecasts are at the low end of the range of forecasts. Fortunately, I have the Treasury figures here. The Chancellor has forecast growth of between $1\frac{3}{4}$ and $2\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. in 1999. The average of the independent forecasters is 1.7 below the low end of the Chancellor's forecast and the exact opposite of what the Prime Minister has just asserted to be the truth, as is so often the case.

The truth is that he said he would cut welfare bills but they are now going up by £37 billion. He said that he would be prudent with the nation's finances and he is now gambling with them. He said that he would keep inflation on target and he has missed the target in 13 months out of 14. He said that there would be no tax increases at all and there have been 17 tax increases. What was meant to be early about the early pledges except the breaking of them?

The Prime Minister: As usual, we got not a single answer out of the right hon. Gentleman on any of the points that were put to him. As I explained to him a moment or two ago, our forecasts are actually based on the low end of the Treasury forecast, and are entirely consistent with all the independent forecasts. Furthermore, as a result of the forecasts—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps, instead of throwing bits of paper at me, he might try to work out where the Conservative party stands on some of the policy issues that face us. We have presented our spending plans based on our forecasts. We believe that they are right and prudent. They will give us current account surpluses, as I explained, and they will reduce the debt to GDP ratio of the economy.

Why can we not get an answer from the right hon. Gentleman on where he stands? Does he think that there should be more spending or less? Come on! He does not know where he stands on monetary policy or on the Bank of England, and he does not know whether the spending plans are too little, too much or about right. He and his party have still not worked out why they lost the last

election. They lost it because people want additional expenditure on schools and hospitals. They now know that we will provide that money for schools and hospitals, whereas the Conservative party would take it away.

Q6.[50302] **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): At the end of the first full academic year of the new Labour Government, will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in praising our teachers, many of whom are dealing with very difficult behaviour in the classroom—for example, throwing bits of paper across the desk? In addition to the welcome resources that the new Labour Government have made available, is there not a need to reinvigorate and re-energise our teachers if we are to meet the education goals that we have set ourselves?

The Prime Minister: The Government's purpose is to put an additional £19 billion over three years into education, but precisely in exchange for reform. I welcome the tremendous work done by many of our teachers throughout the country, but we need reform in the standards, in local education authorities, in literacy and numeracy, in higher education and in the teaching profession itself.

We shall work with the teaching profession and others in the education system to get the reforms through. The deal offered by the Government of substantial additional money in exchange for reform gives our children the best chance of a decent future that they have had for decades.

Q7.[50303] **Mr. David Prior** (North Norfolk): The Prime Minister has said that he expects his Ministers to be purer than pure. In the light of press reports and his own deep personal knowledge of the business dealings and career of the Paymaster General, does he believe that the Paymaster General is indeed purer than pure?

The Prime Minister: Every time that the Conservatives have made an allegation, it has been proved to be worthless. That has been the case every single time. The latest was a series of allegations that were investigated by the relevant Committee, which said that no action should be taken. I well understand why the hon. Gentleman raises such issues—it is because he has absolutely nothing to say about the serious issues of the day.

Q8.[50304] **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): For too long, too many people with disabilities have been denied their full rights and privileges. For that reason, I hope that the whole House will welcome the publication of the White Paper, "Promoting disabled people's rights". Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that rapid progress on those issues will be a high priority, thus fulfilling the Government's commitment to creating a society of opportunity for all our citizens?

The Prime Minister: I can give the assurance that my hon. Friend seeks. Yesterday, we published a White Paper setting out our proposals for the role and functions of the Disability Rights Commission, to which we are committed. The establishment of the commission should be seen alongside the other measures that we have taken to help those disabled people who want to work to get off benefit and into work. Contrary to Conservative Members, we believe that it is right to give those disabled people the chance to get off benefit and into work if they wish to take it. Alongside the Disability Rights Commission, it offers a far better deal for the disabled than was ever offered by the previous Government.

Q9.[50305] **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): We now know from the comprehensive spending review that the cost of cutting numbers in primary school classes will be £620 million, while the saving from abolishing the assisted places scheme will be only £100 million by the relevant time. Is it not time that the Government dropped the pretence that abolishing assisted places had anything to do with meeting new Labour pledges, but everything to do with fanning true Labour prejudice?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is one of the "wants more money" ones. He want more money and would spend another £100 million on assisted places. It is difficult to keep up with Conservative Members.

Abolishing assisted places was right for two reasons. First, I do not think that it is right for the state to subsidise private education; people are entitled to pay for it if that is what they want. Secondly, we have been able to make a start because of the £100 million. From this September, 100,000 young people—five, six and seven-year-olds—will be taught in classes under 30 who, without our policy, would not be. We developed that policy. It is clear from the remarks of the hon. Gentleman and of the Leader of the Opposition that they would oppose it. I hope that the parents of those 100,000 children know that.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): As the Prime Minister knows, I am a campaigner with Age Concern on age discrimination. Would he like to tell the House what the Government have done to improve the lot of older people—unlike the Conservative party, which has started to sack its older staff? Surely even Asda does better than that.

The Prime Minister: We do not believe in sacking people on the grounds of their age. I am sorry that the Conservative party has done so—I should have thought that it could do with some wiser heads round the place. We have announced our extra help for pensioners on low incomes and for all pensioners with their fuel bills, free eye tests and concessionary travel. It is a start in helping not only the poorest pensioners, but all elderly people. The type of society that we want to see is one in which retired people are given the chances and benefits to which anyone who has paid their taxes throughout their life and done their work should be entitled. Under this Government, they are getting those chances.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs is today reported as saying that the Department of Trade and Industry permanent secretary is engaged in a "coup" against him, and that civil servants have "sabotaged" his work. I have given notice to the Minister of my intention to raise the matter as a point of order, but I understand that there is a meeting of DTI Ministers today in London.

Have you, Madam Speaker, received notice from the President of the Board of Trade or the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs of a statement about the total breakdown of trust between the Minister and his civil servants? The President of the Board of Trade has recognised that it is a matter for the House, as she is reported as saying that,

"if the matter was raised by Opposition MPs, she would be forced to defend her civil servants and denounce"

the Minister's remarks.

The matter is now public. Where is the President of the Board of Trade? Will she apologise publicly for the action of her Minister? It is an issue of ministerial accountability and of good manners. Civil servants do not have rights of audience. I submit that the matter is one for the House.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Can you please advise the House what protection is available for officials and civil servants when they are so publicly and viciously attacked by a Minister in their own Department? Furthermore, what trust can the House have in replies that we receive to our parliamentary questions and in debates when a Department is at war with itself—with Ministers set against civil servants and vice versa? Surely it is a matter that must be cleared up very promptly, so that our confidence in the system of parliamentary questions and accountability can be restored.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As a member of the Standing Committee that recently considered the Competition Bill, I was aware that the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs was frequently unable adequately to answer the points raised in that Committee's debates.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order or matter for me. I shall reply to the other points.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Does it relate to the point of order?

Mr. Salmond: It is another aspect.

Madam Speaker: Let me first deal with the point of order. I tell the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) and the House that I have not seen the report to which he referred. He asked whether I have been informed that a Minister is to make a statement. I have no information that any Minister is about to make a statement on the matter.

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. There is another side to the matter. Last week, there was a report in the press naming the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs and the Minister of State, Scottish Office as having been voted by civil servants the worst Ministers in the Government. It is therefore not true that there was not a civil service opinion in the matter.

Madam Speaker: Sometimes journalists never spoil a good story with the facts.

BILL PRESENTED

Pet Ownership (Residential and Sheltered Accommodation)

Burstow presented a Bill to require local authorities to formulate policies to enable people in certain types of accommodation to keep pets; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 236].

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I know that, in the hurly-burly of the House, there needs to be some flexibility, but I came to Prime Minister's questions to hear the Prime Minister questioned, yet in whole chunks of it, he was asking questions and refusing to answer. Is that appropriate, and is it in order?

Madam Speaker: This is a very robust House, and hon. Members on both sides have to discipline themselves so that we hear the questions that are put and the answers. *[Interruption.]* Order. I have been asked a question, and hon. Members must let me answer. It is extremely difficult for me, as Speaker, to keep all hon. Members under control. Some of them are noisier than others—and I know who they are. There are occasions when I point them out, and I shall send them out of the Chamber if this goes on during Question Time. There are people outside this House who want to hear Prime Minister's Question Time, and it is up to hon. Members to allow them to do so.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I have given a ruling, so we cannot have another point of order on it.

Flood Warnings (Vulnerable Properties)

3.35 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to introduce a system of advance warnings whereby people who buy or rent homes, stay in hotels, or rent or pitch caravans or tents in flood plains are informed of the risks; and for connected purposes.

The Bill arises directly out of the Easter floods and the terrible events that many hon. Members will have seen in their constituencies. People were caught in their homes by the rising flood waters, without warning and without even having been aware that they were at risk of flooding. Hundreds of holidaymakers were airlifted from flooded camp sites. Northampton was worst hit, but no one who saw the consequences of the floods or spoke to the victims would want to leave people so vulnerable ever again.

During the ensuing investigations, it became clear that existing provisions to protect and especially to forewarn people of flood risks were completely inadequate. If a developer wants to build new houses in flood plains and the Environment Agency—as the public watchdog on flooding issues—advises against, the local authority can still give approval for the building to go ahead. The new home owners get no warning of the risks until the flood waters come under their front doors. There is no identification of places where people are likely to be especially at risk, such as camp sites, which are often near rivers so that people can enjoy the scenery and water sports. They are not required to have emergency plans to deal with floods or to warn holidaymakers.

The Bill aims to contribute towards plugging some of the gaps. It sets out provisions to ensure that, if developers build new homes in flood plains where there is a risk of flooding, information about the risks is placed on the files of the properties, so that it shows up in local authority searches. It is a substantial measure, as some 4 million new homes will be built in the coming years, and many could well be in flood plains.

The Bill also provides for owners of caravan parks and camp sites that are in flood plains to have evacuation plans, and to make sure that people staying on their property know about the risks and know what to do if there is a flood. For holiday homes at risk of flooding, including mobile homes, there is a requirement to put a flood risk plaque in the property—rather like the fire alarm warnings in many hotels rooms.

For people selling older properties, there is a requirement to disclose to the buyer any history of flooding. That should ensure that people moving into the property know about the risks, without producing a bureaucratic paper chase. For example, some 125 sq km of London is in a flood plain, but very few homes have experienced flooding. To make everyone in inner London check with the Environment Agency about the level of flood risk would produce a complete bureaucratic nightmare, and would achieve nothing, except possibly a property blight.

After the floods in Northampton, I gave a lift home to some young people who had been rescued by boat from a mobile home. The first they knew about the floods was when they opened the front door and found water lapping on the doorstep. They had no way of getting help, and they did not know what to do. For many people, the instinct might be to try to wade through the water to safety, but that would probably be the wrong thing to do, because I am told that flood waters have strong undercurrents and are particularly dangerous. I do not want other people, old or young, to be put in such danger. The Bill would help to prevent that.

Northampton was not the only place to suffer from the floods. People in many other constituencies also suffered, and their Members of Parliament have been of great help in bringing forward the Bill. In addition to the supporters named, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), for Kettering (Mr. Sawford), for Corby (Mr. Hope), for Worcester (Mr. Foster), for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), for Gloucester (Ms Kingham), for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris), for Stroud (Mr. Drew), for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner), for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) and for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner), and the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) for their support in developing the plans.

I also pay tribute to the Environment Agency, for its support and comments on the proposals, to the Caravan Club, for helping to ensure that the provisions were practical and workable, and to the staff of the Public Bill Office, who have provided important assistance.

Many people want to live close to rivers, and many choose to spend their holidays there for scenery or water sports. The Bill would ensure that they were still able to make such a choice, but it would be an informed choice. They could receive the information they needed to ensure that they could get their ideal home or holiday, but would know the risks, and could make arrangements to protect themselves and their families.

Many of us will never forget the terrible scenes at Easter and many members of the public still have to live with the consequences. The Bill would be a small step towards ensuring that the lessons of the floods were learnt and that people would not be left so vulnerable and exposed to risk again.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Ms Sally Keeble, Mr. Tony Clarke, Dr. Evan Harris, Dr. Phyllis Starkey, Mrs. Diana Organ, Mr. Patrick Hall, Mr. John Hayes, Mr. Brian White, Mr. Paddy Tipping, Mr. John Healey, Mr. Paul Keetch and Gillian Merron.

FLOOD WARNINGS (VULNERABLE PROPERTIES)

Ms Sally Keeble accordingly presented a Bill to introduce a system of advance warnings whereby people who buy or rent homes, stay in hotels, or rent or pitch caravans or tents in flood plains are informed of the risks; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 November, and to be printed [Bill 237].

Orders of the Day

Government of Wales Bill

Ordered,

That the Lords Amendments to the Bill be considered in the following order, namely: No. 125; No. 33; Remaining Amendments (other than Nos. 3, 5 to 12, 14 to 16, 18, 20 to 22, 27, 49 and 82); Nos. 49 and 82; Nos. 3, 5 to 12, 14 to 16, 18 and 20 to 22; No. 27.—*[Mr. Jon Owen Jones.]*

Lords amendments considered.

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 125, after clause 112, to insert the following new clause—*Welsh Administration Ombudsman*—

.—(1) There shall be an office of Welsh Administration Ombudsman or Ombwdsmon Gweinyddiaeth Cymru.

(2) Schedule (*Welsh Administration Ombudsman*) (which makes provision about the Welsh Administration Ombudsman and, in particular, enables him to investigate administrative action taken by the Assembly and certain other public bodies in Wales in response to complaints claiming maladministration) has effect.")

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 26, 69, 126, 144, 146, 155, 169, 186, 187, 190, 192, 194, 195, 199, 201, 203, 207 and 210.

Mr. Griffiths: The National Assembly for Wales will be a new, open and accountable form of government for Wales. The Assembly will enable the voice of the people of Wales to be heard at last, through the representatives they elect through the ballot box next May.

The creation of the office of the Welsh Administration ombudsman will ensure that that voice is not only heard, but listened to. The ombudsman will be a strong and independent figure, able to call the Assembly and other public bodies in Wales to task when needed.

The ombudsman will have jurisdiction over a range of non-departmental public bodies and the Assembly. However, the functions of some bodies, such as the Environment Agency, extend both sides of the border. We are not suggesting that the ombudsman should have jurisdiction over those functions of the Environment Agency that relate to England, but only, like the Assembly, over those functions relating to Wales.

The parliamentary commissioner currently has jurisdiction over certain executive non-departmental public bodies in Wales. Those will fall to the Welsh ombudsman to investigate. We are giving the Assembly powers by order to add the other bodies to the ombudsman's jurisdiction. If the Assembly is given responsibilities in new areas in which non-departmental public bodies operate, those too could be brought within the ombudsman's jurisdiction.

We have also made provision to extend the jurisdiction of the health service commissioner for Wales to cover the Assembly's exercise of its health functions. Perhaps I might outline the way in which the ombudsman will operate.

If an individual or body is aggrieved as a consequence of alleged maladministration, it will be open to them to make a complaint to the ombudsman, who will have effective powers to investigate such allegations. Complainants will be able to go direct to the ombudsman if they wish, rather than via their Assembly Member. That mirrors the position between the health service and local government.

The outcome of the investigations will be reported to all concerned, including the complainant, any Assembly Member who assisted the complainant in submitting the allegation, and the individual against whom—or the body against which—the allegations have been made. It will also be reported to the Assembly First Secretary.

If such allegations are upheld, the body must notify the ombudsman within three months of the actions that it proposes will remedy the matter. If no response, or an inadequate response, is forthcoming, the ombudsman may recommend in a further report what action is to be taken. If the Assembly is the subject of the further report, the amendments provide that the Assembly First Secretary must lay the report before the Assembly and give notice of a motion that the recommendations be approved.

The amendments provide a strong and effective means for pursuing complaints against the Assembly and public bodies in Wales. I might add that the approach has the full support of the parliamentary commissioner. As I said earlier, the ombudsman's jurisdiction will extend only as far as the exercise of functions of the Assembly or a public body in Wales. The office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration already has jurisdiction over matters outside Wales, and will retain jurisdiction over matters in Wales outside the Assembly's remit. The functions of the two offices will therefore not overlap.

The amendments are important, and substantially improve the Bill. The Government tabled them in response to points made by hon. Members on Report. I hope that they will be widely supported.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): It is good to have the Bill back from the other place. It has been so long since we have been able to speak on these measures, I was almost having withdrawal symptoms. I am sure that all hon. Members share that sentiment.

We welcome the creation of the wholly separate position of the Welsh Administration ombudsman. It was requested during earlier proceedings. If anything, it proves how useful a revising chamber can be in considering what we say and giving the Government the chance to amend legislation, as they have admirably in many parts of the Bill.

We welcome the fact that individuals will be able to take their complaints to the Welsh Administration ombudsman without the need to go through their Assembly Member—after, of course, ensuring that all the other avenues open to members of the public have been exhausted.

We welcome the clear procedure on allowing bodies against which a complaint has been made a strict three-month time limit to respond. If the response is late or insufficient, the ombudsman has the power to make a further report. In that report, he can make recommendations on what action should be taken. Will the Minister clarify the course of action to ensure proper redress if no action, or insufficient action, is taken following the ombudsman's second report?

The range of bodies over which the Welsh Administration ombudsman will be responsible is extensive. Although I welcome that, I have one or two concerns.

First, the time that people will have to wait before receiving a full response to their complaint must be kept to a minimum. The area of responsibility is now wide, and one can imagine all sorts of complaints coming to the ombudsman, especially if his existence is made well known. That is not a plea for the Minister to spend a six-figure sum advertising the fact that the new position exists, so that everybody knows how to get in touch with the ombudsman. However, we are keen to see some form of information campaign to ensure that members of the public, through their local libraries and other organisations, know that the Welsh Administration ombudsman will be there, and how to use that person.

I shall not prejudge the number of complaints that the Welsh Administration ombudsman will receive, but there could be many, and we need to know that he will have sufficient staff to handle them all. There is provision in the Bill to consider the staffing arrangements, but we need to know that, when the complaints start coming in, they will be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible.

My second concern is connected with the first. What percentage of the cost will be taken from its current budgetary position and added to the Welsh block? Will any additional costs be taken from within the current block budget? Obviously, if any of the money comes from within the block, that money will not be available to spend elsewhere. I know that discussions are now taking place with the Welsh Office about where the money will come from.

We understand that the ombudsman will have the power to repay, from time to time, money spent by a complainant—expenses and so on. It is difficult to estimate now how much money that will entail, but we need some assurance from the Minister that sufficient money will be made available from elsewhere and added to the Welsh block, so that none of it has to come from front-line services.

The health service commissioner will be able to look into

"a failure in a service provided by the Assembly in the exercise of a function of the Assembly relating to the National Health Service"

and also

"a failure by the Assembly to provide a service the provision of which is an Assembly health service function".

He could therefore be extremely busy looking into the areas of the NHS relevant to the powers of the Assembly.

Many complaints may be related, through the health service commissioner, to action taken before the Assembly came into being. I am looking for clarification of that, too. We know that the Minister is involved in an enormous consultation process about the reorganisation of the trusts. We heard about that during Welsh Questions today. Adjournment debates have also been held about it, and many questions have been tabled.

My question, therefore, is: is it not rather unfair to rush all that through? After all, the Minister's party believes that devolution is its Government's flagship legislation. Labour Members have trumpeted it all—so is it not right that the Assembly should have an opportunity to consider the proposals, especially if the health service commissioner will thereafter have questions and complaints put to him?

Why does the Minister have to rush everything through and get it on the statute book by 1 April, a few weeks before the Assembly comes into being? Has he considered—if not, I ask him to do so—carrying on with his investigations, but passing all the information to the Assembly, so that its members can make the recommendations? If the Government believe in devolution, surely it is up to the Assembly members to examine health provision in Wales and make the recommendations.

I have asked the Minister a few questions, and I hope that he will be able to reassure me about at least some of the points that I have raised.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I welcome the changes to the Bill. The Minister was kind enough to say that the Government were responding to representations made on Report, and Plaid Cymru's new clause about an ombudsman for Wales was relevant in that context, so we are glad that the Government have moved in that direction.

However, there are one or two areas of uncertainty concerning how things will work out, especially with regard to the possible overlap between the functions of the ombudsman relating to the National Assembly for Wales and those of the central Government ombudsman. When the Minister opened the debate, he tried to reassure the House that there should be no overlap, but I wonder what the position will be when there are orders that can be exercised either by a Secretary of State in London, who is a member of the British Government, or by the Assembly.

If people have a grievance because neither the Secretary of State nor the Assembly has fulfilled their responsibilities, which either of them may exercise, for undertaking actions by order—we shall hear examples of those later—where should they seek redress? Will the Minister respond to that question when he closes this short debate?

Secondly, there is a general question as to the seriousness with which the National Assembly will regard the work and reports of the ombudsmen. The complaints that constituents frequently make, whether they relate to the local government ombudsmen—which are, perhaps, more common—or the central Government ombudsman, are that, although their case was investigated, nothing happened. They sought redress and changes in policy following an investigation, and sometimes a positive report by an ombudsman, but there was not an adequate mechanism to ensure that such changes took place.

Thirdly, I hope that there will be a regular debate in the National Assembly, not only about specific complaints but about the general patterns of complaints in the ombudsman's reports. The National Assembly must take those on board regularly, not only when it is kicked hard enough to make it sit up and take notice.

Having made those three points, I welcome the change to the Bill. It builds in an additional safeguard for citizens, and I am glad to support the amendment.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The Liberal Democrats also welcome the amendment. Ombudsmen

[Mr. Lembit Öpik]

have been around since 1967, and the local government ombudsmen were created in 1974. People with a grievance against a public body are now necessarily entitled to have their complaint investigated by an independent person at no cost to the complainant. The success of that principle is demonstrated by the extension of the concept of ombudsmen to the private sector, to include organisations such as banks, building societies and insurance companies.

We welcome the fact that people will be able to make their complaints directly to the Welsh Administration ombudsman. The need to go through a councillor before making a complaint reduces the number of people using the service. That stipulation was removed in 1988, and the number of complaints increased significantly. That shows that a requirement to submit a complaint via an elected member would cause a barrier to many potential complainants. However, complaints to the parliamentary ombudsman still have to be made through a Member of Parliament. That may deter some people from using that service.

It is essential that the ombudsman is adequately resourced to allow complaints to be investigated thoroughly and without undue delay. Otherwise, encouragement to use the system would be an own goal.

We are pleased that some of the problems encountered by other ombudsmen have been taken on board by the Government. The Welsh Assembly will be able to amend the list of bodies within the jurisdiction of the WAO, which is welcome. The local government ombudsmen have been unable to deal with complaints about newly created bodies that should logically fall within their jurisdiction, but that will not be a problem for the WAO.

The WAO will have stronger powers following the publication of a further report against the Assembly. I understand that, if the Assembly is subject to a further report, the First Secretary must lay the report before the Assembly and give notice of motion that its recommendations be approved. I should be grateful for confirmation of that in the Minister's closing remarks.

4 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths: I shall deal first with the points made by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). Like the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, the Welsh ombudsman will not have formal enforcement powers, but if the Assembly fails to comply, that will be because it has formally and publicly rejected a motion put down by the First Secretary to approve the ombudsman's recommendations. That point was also raised by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). The Assembly will have publicly to reject the motion. Ever the optimist, I do not think it likely that the Welsh Assembly would reject a motion relating to the recommendations of the Welsh ombudsman.

There will be a transfer from the Cabinet Office vote to the Welsh block to cover the costs of the office; but if the Welsh ombudsman is the same person as the parliamentary ombudsman, no salary will be payable—not that I would want that to influence the way in which we make progress.

Once the office has been created, all NHS complaints will go to the Welsh ombudsman. Up to that point, they will have been dealt with by the health service ombudsman. Therefore, we do not want to muddy the waters; it is the date that will make the difference.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley may think that the Government have rushed the NHS reconfiguration, but considering that the process will have taken almost two years to complete, during which there has been wide consultation in Wales, it would be inappropriate to hold up the possibility of saving some £7 million a year, which will go from administration into health care, to await decisions from the Assembly. The Assembly will thank us for going ahead with these changes, so that it has additional money to allocate to the health service in Wales.

Mr. Evans: Lack of speed is not one of the allegations that I would throw at the Welsh Office, but we are talking about only a few weeks. I understand what the Minister says about the savings that may occur as a result of the reconfiguration, but the Administration may not welcome the changes that the Minister may then be making, and it would have to overhaul some of them, which at the end of the day may be more expensive.

Therefore, would it not be better to wait a few weeks until the Assembly is up and running, bring it into the consultation procedure, and convince it that the changes that the Minister wants to make are the right ones, but allow the Assembly to have its say? In a spirit of inclusiveness—as someone who did not parade the wonders of devolution, that is fairly new to me—I am now saying that we should let the Assembly have its say.

Mr. Griffiths: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman has not quite got to grips with all that this will mean. It is not a question of hanging on for only a few weeks. We shall have been consulting the Welsh people for three months on the actual proposals. Anyone who has expressed a desire to stand for the Assembly will have had three months, and will still have two months in which to make observations on the trusts reconfiguration proposals. We want the new trusts to be well prepared on 1 April, so they will have five to six months to prepare themselves for the new regime and order of the day. To hold everything up until next April means holding things up not for a few weeks but for six or seven months.

We have already spent more than a year consulting on the principle and practice of the new trusts, so I do not think that anyone would thank us for hanging on much longer and creating all sorts of uncertainties in the health service. As I have said before in the House, some people have told me that I have moved too quickly, others have told me that I have moved too slowly, and others still have said that I have moved both too quickly and too slowly. I think that we have got it about right.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Does not my hon. Friend agree that we are talking about a substantial point? If the Assembly is to be the all-singing, all-dancing body that it has been promoted as over the past year, surely it would be better to have a delay of five or six months to allow the new fount of democracy to make a decision than to make any decision now. I presume that he will not deny that the Assembly will have the right immediately to overthrow any decision that he may take towards the end of the year.

I find it most peculiar that the Welsh Office is advertising for chairmen for the new trusts while the proposals are still out to consultation. If the Welsh Office has already decided what the new configuration will be, why bother to consult on it? The Assembly will contain a corpus of informed opinion, so it will be ready to make a political decision. I should have thought that waiting a few months for the 60 brains to be brought together in the new Assembly would be far more democratic, inclusive and of benefit to the people.

Mr. Griffiths: My hon. Friend does justice neither to himself nor to his constituents, who have made vigorous representations to me about the proposals on NHS reconfiguration. I can only repeat that the consultation has been very wide and detailed. Anyone who is thinking of standing for the Assembly could already have made a contribution to that consultation process.

Staff in the health service want us to come to some decisions on the proposals. If we do not, those decisions will have to wait longer than six or seven months, as the Assembly will not be able to decide to do everything completely differently; it, too, would have to consult properly on any changes that it wanted to make. I think that everyone in Wales—both those working in the health service and those being cared for by it—will want us to save money in administration so that we can spend more on health care. Moreover, I am sure that the Welsh ombudsman will be able to deal very satisfactorily with any problems in the health service.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) mentioned joint orders and the overlap of jurisdictions between different ombudsmen. Schedule 9 provides for consultation and co-operation between ombudsmen, so that any overlap can be sorted out by agreement. If the ombudsmen decided that the complaint was equally important to their activities—if they felt that neither the Minister of the Crown nor the Assembly had acted appropriately, or that they should investigate allegations—they could work together to deal with the issue.

I think that I have covered all the points raised, so I commend the amendment to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 22

TRANSFER OF MINISTERIAL FUNCTIONS

Lords amendment: No. 33, in page 13, line 25, at end insert—

("( ) Schedule (*Transfer etc. of functions: further provisions*) (which makes further provision about the transfer etc. of functions by Order in Council under this section) has effect.")

Mr. Win Griffiths: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 34 to 36, 45, 54, 151, 157, 158, 161 to 163, 168 and 170.

Mr. Griffiths: The amendments clarify what functions the Assembly may be given in England in respect of the sea and in respect of cross-border bodies—that is, bodies whose activities relate to Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom.

The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), signalled on Report on 25 March the intention to table in another place amendments relating to clause 23. He undertook that any such amendments would not enable the transfer order to give the Assembly more functions in England than was possible under clause 23, and that they would maintain the mechanisms that are in the Bill in respect of the Assembly's functions in England. We have kept to that undertaking.

The principal amendments are No. 34, which deletes clause 23; No. 170, which reproduces many of its provisions in a new schedule; and No. 157, which defines "Wales" as including the territorial sea adjacent to Wales. I propose to concentrate my remarks on the significant changes made by those amendments.

Paragraph 3 of the new schedule limits the range of functions that the Assembly can be given in parts of England that adjoin Wales. Previously, the Bill had allowed potentially any function to be given to the Assembly in respect of a cross-border area; however, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary made clear on Report, we intend to transfer such functions to the Assembly only in respect of rivers and other water-related matters. The term "rivers" encompasses the functions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State currently exercises in respect of flood defence and navigation on rivers. The amendment also makes it clear that the Assembly can be given functions only in parts of England that adjoin Wales, and only if the Assembly is given the equivalent functions for the whole or part of Wales. That constitutes a significant narrowing compared to the approach in clause 23(6)(c) and I hope that the House will agree that the clarification is welcome.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend, but I want to get an assurance from him. He has got to paragraph 3, but is going to explain paragraph 2 of the schedule?

Mr. Griffiths: I hope that I shall cover that. Perhaps my hon. Friend will remind me of it, if it appears that I am not going to do as he asks.

I am sure that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) will find the amendment particularly helpful in demolishing, once and for all, the suggestion that the Assembly would have responsibility for schools in parts of Herefordshire. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary had already dealt with that point on Report on 25 March—*Hansard* column 645, if the hon. Gentleman wants to check—but the amendment puts the matter beyond any doubt.

Amendment No. 157 provides that:

"'Wales' includes the sea adjacent to Wales out as far as the seaward boundary of the territorial sea,"

which extends 12 nautical miles from the coast. That definition of Wales will apply for all the purposes of the Bill. One effect is that the Assembly may be given ministerial functions only in respect of the territorial sea.

Two other provisions flow from that definition of Wales. First, amendment No. 158 provides an order-making power to determine any boundary between the parts of the sea that areto be treated as adjacent to Wales and those that are not. Amendment No. 151 provides for such an order to be subject to the affirmative

[Mr. Griffiths]

resolution procedure. That power is necessary in the case of the Dee and Severn estuaries and the Bristol channel, where the coast of Wales lies less than 24 nautical miles from the coast of England.

Secondly, paragraph 4 of the new schedule, which is inserted by amendment No. 170, provides that the transfer order may require a Minister of the Crown to consult the Assembly about certain functions essentially to do with the disposal and abandonment of oil and gas installations in the sea adjacent to the territorial sea—that is, beyond the 12-mile limit. There is a similar order-making power to define the boundaries of "Welsh controlled waters" for the purposes of that paragraph.

Paragraph 3 makes it clear that an order under clause 22 may give the Assembly functions in respect of a range of cross-border bodies as diverse as the Environment Agency, Audit Commission, Intervention Board and the North West and North Wales sea fisheries committee, to give just a few examples. The previous definition in clause 23(6)(d) would not have allowed the Assembly to inherit many of the functions that my right hon. Friend currently exercises, and the amendment corrects that oversight.

In the light of the further consideration that we have given to the Assembly's functions, it has become apparent that there are a limited number of functions that it will exercise in Wales but whose principal effect may be felt in England. The effect could take the form of a serious adverse impact on water resources, the water supply or the quality of water in England, and relates to matters such as abstractions from, and discharges into, rivers that flow across the border. We believe that, in recognition of the interests of people living in England who may be affected by the Assembly's decisions in Wales, there should be a limited override power allowing the Secretary of State to intervene and to take certain decisions in place of the Assembly.

4.15 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Why does the Minister think that the Secretary of State is likely to behave more responsibly than the Assembly?

Mr. Griffiths: It is not an issue of responsibility, because I am sure that the Assembly, the Secretary of State for Wales and other Secretaries of State with responsibilities in England whose actions might affect Wales will behave very responsibly. It is a cross-border issue involving consultation at an English level. In the cases that I have described, it would be appropriate for the Secretary of State to have some responsibility in this matter.

Mr. Wigley: In order to ensure that we understand him correctly, will the Minister spell out his intentions in respect of these changes? Is he really saying that we will give the Secretary of State—whose political colour may be different from that of the Government of the Assembly—a veto over the Assembly when it comes to decisions about abstracting water from rivers in Wales in order to supply the industrial needs of cities in England? Is that what the Government are offering in the amendment? Has the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions turned over Welsh Office Ministers to that extent?

Mr. Griffiths: The issue has absolutely nothing to do with the right hon. Gentleman's question. It is a matter of approaching the matter sensibly.

The Environment Agency could also have some input. The Assembly will have to consider issues on the Welsh side of the border, and the Secretary of State will consider those on the English side. For example, the Environment Agency would have something to say if a decision had adverse effects on the Welsh or English sides of the border. There can be no question of any action taken by the Secretary of State in relation to England having a detrimental effect on the Welsh side of the border. It is a question of balancing these matters, and that is provided for in paragraph 6 of the new schedule. The override power can apply to functions in parts of two named Acts only, and, in due course, the transfer orders will set out our proposals for the precise areas where the override power will be available.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the right hon. Gentleman about a number of those issues, and I am sure that he will want to consider that correspondence. Certain matters relating to abstraction—to which the right hon. Gentleman referred specifically—will not be covered by this provision; responsibility will remain with Welsh bodies. The right hon. Gentleman should look at the legislation. Abstraction is dealt with under part II of the Water Resources Act 1991, and is excluded from the override provisions. I give him an absolute assurance on that point.

On the matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), paragraph 2 of the new schedule is already covered by clause 23(6)(a). It is not new. The purpose is to allow the Assembly to be given responsibility for any function that relates to the Welsh language and culture, whether inside or outside Wales—for example, the power to make grants to education authorities for Welsh language teaching under the Education Act 1996. We propose that the Assembly should have that power for Wales and England.

Irrespective of the override power, as a matter of administrative law the Assembly will have to take account of the wider impact of its decisions across a range of environmental functions, including any impact that may be felt in England.

I have just been reminded that part II of the Water Resources Act was included in the override power, although it says explicitly—this is where my confusion arose—that applications will not be a matter for Ministers, but will be dealt with my the Environment Agency. Ministers would participate in the process only if an application were rejected and was subject to an appeal.

I hope that, with all those matters taken into consideration, the House will be able to agree to the amendment.

Mr. Dafis: Before I deal with the amendment, I should like to say a word about amendment No. 157, which defines the maritime boundary of Wales. Will the Minister comment on the implications of that definition and on the Assembly's powers vis-a-vis the effects of pollution arising from oil and gas exploration and extraction both

inside and beyond the area defined as being within Welsh territorial waters? Does he agree that, despite its limited powers in that area, the Assembly will need to develop a comprehensive energy strategy for Wales, and that it will have a lively interest in oil and gas exploration in the seas off Wales? It may prefer alternative developments, such as the large-scale offshore wind technology advocated by Greenpeace.

The Department of Trade and Industry, which licenses oil and gas exploration and exploitation, will have to listen seriously to the Assembly's opinion and have regard to its views about an appropriate energy strategy for Wales and its concerns about the environment.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman just referred to Welsh territorial waters. The Bill talks about territorial waters "adjacent to Wales"—in other words, British territorial waters. Is he suggesting that the Assembly should be responsible for all the acts relating to those territorial waters?

Mr. Dafis: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has derived some kind of pleasure from picking up on a small point of definition. The people of Wales regard the seas off the Welsh coasts as being a part of Wales that impinges on their welfare and interests. As I understand it, the amendment is about defining where Wales comes to an end in the sea. *[Laughter.]* Indeed. I hope that the Minister will address the issues that I have raised on energy and the development of energy policy.

In respect of Lords amendment No. 170, the concern is that the Assembly would be constrained in its ability to ensure the implementation of what might be described as a sustainable water strategy for Wales. Surely it will need to consider that because water is important for environmental policy and vital for economic development policy, both of which come within a sustainable development policy.

Wales is richly endowed with invaluable water resources. I do not need to tell hon. Members that water is becoming increasingly important in the United Kingdom and globally. We know that there is an impending significant, and perhaps serious, water shortage in certain parts of the United Kingdom arising from the increasing use of water in development and in agriculture as well as in industry. Demand and consumption are rising, and there is the whole question of climate change.

I emphasise that thought is currently being given to the large-scale transfer of water resources from various parts of the United Kingdom to areas that will suffer water shortages. That certainly includes Wales, so new reservoirs and impounding water will be on the agenda within the next 10 to 15 years. The availability of water is also relevant to the location of economic activity, and to where it is appropriate to locate certain industries and to grow certain agricultural crops. Wales should be able to benefit from its plentiful supply of water and, rather than exporting water as a raw material, value would be added to water in Wales.

We need to get the matter clear now and hear the Minister's view: would the Assembly have to approve any transfer of water, which there might have to be in certain circumstances? Surely the Assembly would have to approve such a transfer. It simply would not be acceptable for the Secretary of State to be able to override it on the grounds in Lords amendment No. 170 and especially paragraph 6(1) of the new schedule.

The Minister referred to the Secretary of State's letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on this matter. The Secretary of State said:

> "The compulsory purchase and compulsory works powers needed to build a new reservoir are in part VI of the Water Industries Act 1991 and the override power of the Secretary of State therefore would not permit intervention."

However, the amendment refers not to the Water Industries Act 1991, but to the Water Resources Act 1991, part VII of which applies to compulsory purchase in respect of the laying of pipes. That is relevant to reservoirs and water transfers, and I should like to hear what the Minister has to say about it.

There seems to be confusion between the two 1991 Acts. Part II of the Water Resources Act 1991 concerns abstraction licences, although I do not know whether subsequent legislation and amendment means that the provisions have been shifted to other parts of that Act. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) shakes his head, which is a great comfort to me—a great discomfort, I should say. We need satisfactory clarification of these matters. If we do not receive it, we shall be obliged to divide the House.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Let me take up some of the points made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis). One of his simpler points involved Lords amendment No. 157, and its definition of Wales as including

> "the sea . . . as far as the . . . boundary of the territorial sea".

We welcome that definition, but it would not allow the Assembly to influence decisions on oil explorations more than 12 miles offshore.

We all know of the grid in the Irish sea where there are possibilities of drilling—and, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, opportunities for pollution, which we would be unable to prevent. The Assembly could debate such an issue under the general provisions of the Bill, but it could not have a formal say in regard to, for example, a planning application for oil exploration just 13 miles off the Welsh coast. That is worrying, and I should like to know how the Government propose to deal with it.

Paragraph 4 of the new schedule proposed in Lords amendment No. 170 provides for the Assembly to be consulted about the abandonment of oil and gas installations—a very topical subject—but not about new explorations. Many members of the Assembly would not consider that right.

4.30 pm

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of the new schedule is the provision in paragraph 6 that allows the Secretary of State to overrule the Assembly on matters of water supply and quality if the exercise of a function in that regard might have a "serious adverse impact" in England. We consider that far too wide-ranging. It would allow the Secretary of State to go against the Assembly's opinion and to allow, for example, water extraction from Welsh rivers for use in England.

There is clearly a need for effective water management between England and Wales, and there may be a need for the transfer of water from Wales to some parts of England

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

that have less water, but we think it essential for that to take place with the permission of the Assembly, rather than at the will of the Secretary of State.

As a constituency Member, I am particularly interested in that aspect. The River Wye and the River Usk flow through my constituency, and there is a huge issue of compensatory flow at times of water shortage. Moreover, Welsh Water is putting many more boreholes in both river valleys so that water can be extracted for public consumption. The problem is that that lowers the river levels, and has a grave ecological effect on the rivers. If we are to be asked for more abstraction for England without the Assembly's being able to have an impact on decisions, we shall be in considerable trouble.

The question has arisen in the past of the supply of water from the Elan valley, and the agreement that was struck between Welsh Water and Severn Trent plc for the supply of water to the midlands. That was achieved, but it was controversial at the time. I have in my house plans made 100 years ago—which I have discussed with a neighbour—for a water grid to supply southern England, which is now being talked about again. The plans are very sophisticated, even by today's standards. They allow for the damming of the River Irfon, just above Builth Wells, for piped water to go into Llangors lake, near where I live, for the level of the lake to be raised considerably and for water to flow down the Usk and into the Thames system down to Staines. It is all there on paper, and I am sure that it could be resuscitated.

It would be a disgrace if the Welsh Assembly could not influence such activity, but it could happen within the next 10 years. We must have safeguards, enabling the Assembly to influence water abstraction from Wales for use elsewhere. I feel very strongly about the matter.

Mr. Rogers: What aspect would the Assembly want to influence—the engineering side, the projects side or just the costs side?

Mr. Livsey: I do not think that the House would want me to go into a treatise on construction. Matters of principle must be considered, such as the issue of a way-leave for pipes that may cross land but from which no one in Wales would benefit.

We welcome the fact that the Assembly has a role in the development of the Welsh language and culture within and outside Wales. During the referendum campaign, I discovered that there are 400,000 Welsh speakers in England and 500,000 in Wales. That is a fascinating statistic. The Assembly should provide an excellent opportunity for the Welsh language and culture to be given appropriate priority, and I am sure that they will flourish in the future.

The other provisions of the new schedule, especially those that provide clarification, are welcome. However, the possibility of the Secretary of State overruling the Assembly on water issues is a very serious matter.

Mr. Rowlands: This is an important and substantial debate. It is a genuine attempt to limit and narrow the issues that were raised in earlier debates. Nevertheless, it has raised other issues, such the problem of water which was mentioned by the previous two speakers. I want to draw attention to the potential confusion that could arise, and the potential for friction between the Assembly and Government Departments. It is in the common interest of everyone who wants devolution to work to deal with the potential areas of friction and dispute in these clauses.

The report of the debates on these amendments in the other place on 2 June are to be found at columns 225 and 231-36 of the House of Lords *Hansard*. Those debates show the wide-ranging nature of the provisions in the schedule, despite the Minister's attempts to limit them. The schedule contains wide and sweeping powers.

The new schedule refers to transfers of functions. We have had a continuing debate on one aspect of this issue, about which we are still no clearer. In the other place, Lord Williams of Mostyn said that functions relating to animal health and food safety, including those under the Food Safety Act 1990, would be transferred to the Assembly. Therefore, the regulations that were used to ban beef on the bone will be a function of the Assembly.

Lord Williams referred to a joint responsibility with the Minister of Agriculture. I have asked this question many times, and I am still waiting for an answer. What will happen if there is a dispute between the Assembly and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food? Who will have the final say? Will the Minister of Agriculture have the power under the 1990 Act on an issue such as meat on the bone to override the strong wishes expressed by the Assembly, or will the Assembly's view prevail? The Bill does not contain a disputes procedure.

Before we let the provision through, we should be clear in our minds about who will have the final say if there is joint responsibility; otherwise, there will be considerable friction. Let us take the vivid example of exercising power under meat on the bone regulations. If the Assembly decided not to implement the ban, but MAFF wanted to apply the order, whose view would finally prevail if it was a joint responsibility? That is an extremely basic proposition, but it will test the model that we are trying to establish.

Amendment No. 170 relates to cross-border arrangements. Opposition Members put their finger on the provisions in paragraph 6 of the new schedule, which provide that "the Secretary of State"—not the Secretary of State for Wales—or the relevant Minister will have overriding power. However, we are still in the dark. Paragraph 7(b) of the proposed new schedule states that

"the function may be exercised by the Assembly only with the agreement of, or after consultation with, a Minister of the Crown."

There is a big difference between consultation and agreement. Consultation implies that one party has the right to override the other.

It is difficult to work out the issues that are covered by paragraph 7. Some orders might be for agreement and some could be subject to consultation. We should not rubber stamp such provisions. We should be given vivid illustrations and examples of the areas that would be subject to agreement and those that would be for consultation. Unless we are given those, we may be creating headaches for Ministers or for the Assembly. We must clarify cross-border issues and areas for which the Bill provides for joint responsibility. We must know who will have the final say and how disputes are to be settled. Without that information, there will be a recipe for potential conflict, and none of us wants that.

Lord Williams of Mostyn spoke about what he called water issues. His speech shows that the schedule also covers matters such as rent rebate subsidy and its impact on social security benefits. Lord Williams of Mostyn's explanation is contained in column 233 of *Hansard* and shows the consultation that has to take place with Ministers, especially the Secretary of State for Social Security, because of the ripple effect, if, for example, the Assembly grants a generous rent rebate subsidy and is willing to pay for it. What is the Government's position on rent subsidies? I do not remember thinking in Committee that the Assembly would have rent subsidy powers, but such powers are logical. They are lodged with local government and must be Assembly responsibilities of one sort or another. Lord Williams of Mostyn said:

"In the longer term, we will consider providing for a separate rent rebate subsidy payable by a UK Minister similar to the current arrangements in Scotland."

I apologise for my ignorance, but I was not aware that our rent rebate subsidy system was different from the one in Scotland. As a result, there will be complications if the Assembly proceeds to exercise its duty, responsibility or power to be more generous, or less generous, on rent rebate subsidies. Lord Williams of Mostyn also observed:

"However, such changes will need to be considered in the context of the Government's comprehensive spending review. This may reach conclusions that would entail amending the relevant provisions of the 1989 Act for both England and Wales. We would want to avoid cutting across the conclusions of that review by making changes to the 1989 Act only in respect of Wales. For that reason we are not making such amendments now."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 June 1998; Vol.590, c.234.]

We have now had the comprehensive spending review, so perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister can tell us what consequential amendments need to be made to the rent subsidy arrangements. That is an integral part of the issues that arise from the new schedule.

We all want the system to work. I read with great interest something that came through the post over the last day or so. It was Mr. Peter Hennessy's lecture to the Lloyds TSB forum. This is what he said about devolution—it is pertinent and rather well put:

"The edifice of devolution is very largely constructed on the harmony model. But that desirable state of affairs cannot be guaranteed. Far from it."

If the harmony model survives, I can see that many of the issues and concerns that we are scratching at in our debate on the schedule may prove to be modest or minor. However, if the harmony model breaks down, the legislation must be robust enough to cope with that. I am not convinced that the complex and difficult wording of the schedule establishes a sufficiently robust model to deal with important demarcation disputes, possible boundary disputes and potential areas of conflict between the Assembly and the Government.

4.45 pm

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I am pleased to be called to speak in this important debate on Lords amendment No. 170. As hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise, the powers of the Assembly will be curtailed in relation to powers of the Secretary of State—the Secretary of State will have some overriding powers—so it is right that we test some of the issues that have been aired by hon. Members.

I apologise to the Minister for not being here for his first few sentences, but I listened carefully to the remainder of his speech and I did not hear him referring to paragraph 5 and European matters. He will recall that on a number of occasions in Committee I asked questions about these issues. When he replies, will he deal with some of the points that arise from paragraph 5?

Paragraph 5 deals with two issues. The first is ensuring that any treaty obligations for the United Kingdom pertain in all parts of the UK, so in a devolved system we understand the need for sub-paragraph (a). The main issue relates to sub-paragraph (b), which refers to the powers that both the Assembly and the Secretary of State will have in implementing statutory instruments that flow from European directives. Who will have responsibility for passing the statutory instruments and who will have the ultimate sanction?

The list of statutory instruments covered by sub-paragraph (b) contain a number of important ones for Wales. I draw the Minister's attention to two areas where the Assembly might wish to differ from regulations in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland. An example might be the hill livestock compensatory allowances. The Assembly may or may not want to enhance the payments to farmers. For the sake of argument, let us assume that they want to keep the amount currently paid to farmers, but want to distribute it in a different way. Let us assume that the Assembly wants to target the allowances differently, to ensure that farmers who really need them get them. Under sub-paragraph (b), the Assembly would be prevented from doing so unless the same provisions applied in other parts of the United Kingdom. That seems to be an unnecessary restriction.

The Minister will know that one of hon. Members' concerns about the dairy quota is how little quota is available for young farmers entering the industry. What if the Assembly wants to operate a siphon system to ensure that part of the quota is set aside for young farmers? Although such a system has been considered by many Select Committees, the Conservative Government always refused to accept one. If the Assembly wanted to go down that road, paragraph 5 would prevent it from doing so.

We are debating issues not of money but of principle. We are debating issues of how resources might be distributed in Wales differently from the way in which they are distributed in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Will the Assembly be prevented by the provision from such activities? *[Interruption.]* What if the Welsh Assembly wants to innovate in matters covered by statutory instruments on equal pay or air quality standards? What if the Welsh Assembly wants to do different things—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. General conversations are breaking out throughout the Chamber. Hon. Members must listen to the hon. Member who is addressing the House.

Mr. Jones: I am grateful for your intervention, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My question—I am sure that the Minister is aware of the point—is, what ability will the Assembly have to think afresh and to think through new ideas? Will the Assembly have simply to consider what is happening elsewhere? Will the Secretary of State simply override it?

[Mr. Jones]

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) put his finger on the question—who will have the final say? That is the important question. I hope that the Minister will assure us that, on the issues I have mentioned, the Assembly will have the final say.

Mr. Rogers: On many of those issues, neither the Assembly nor this place will have the final say. Many of the cross-border issues that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) mentioned, such as pollution, are covered by European legislation. European legislation will increasingly cover those issues. As for the Welsh Assembly being able to think afresh about those issues, it just will not happen.

I should like to return to the territorial waters issue. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) said that I made a rather trivial point. The point was not trivial but most significant. Although the Assembly will have a say on oil exploration, mineral development and Celtic sea pollution, those matters are subject to international treaties signed by the United Kingdom Government. The Welsh Assembly will have to operate within those parameters. Unfortunately—this is where I have great sympathy for the three Plaid Cymru Members in the Chamber—the Assembly will not have legislative and tax-raising powers or be able to negotiate as has been suggested.

I do not think that we should create the impression that the Assembly will be an all-singing, all-dancing body that can do all those things. In the foreseeable future, under the terms of this Bill, it will not be able to do so.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): It would be churlish of me to begin my speech without congratulating Ministers on the splendour of their yellow flowers.

Mr. Rogers: Daffodils.

Mr. Letwin: Daffodils. Indeed.

I take pleasure—I think that that is how it was described—in dealing with a small point of definition. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), who made many excellent points in Committee, drew the Minister's attention to paragraph 3(2) of the new schedule in Lords amendment No. 170. In that sub-paragraph, a "cross-border body" is so defined that it means the whole of England, save one part—let us imagine, for example, Dorset. Therefore, Dorset would adjoin Wales if it were the whole of England, save one part.

We are told that the saving grace is sub-paragraph (3), in which the transfer of powers over the whole of England, bar Dorset, would be limited to the transfer of powers over water resources in the whole of England, bar Dorset. A further saving grace, I suppose, is provided by paragraph 6, whereby the Minister—if he feels that a consequence of having transferred to the Assembly power over water resources of the whole of England, bar Dorset, is that that power is being used wrongly—can intervene and overrule the Assembly. I cannot think of a way in which the Government could conceivably have concocted a greater chance of dispute between Ministers and the Welsh Assembly in respect of water, but it is not my purpose to tease the Government or to dwell on the matter at length. However, I should like the Minister to guarantee that, despite the latitude defined in paragraph 3(2), the Government have no intention of applying it, and any transfer of functions over water which occurs to Wales will be, in the ordinary expectation of the term, a cross-border function and not an abuse engendered by the drafting of the provision. It would be extremely helpful if the Minister put that on the record and set the matter to rest.

Much was said in Committee about paragraph 5, which continues to make it perfectly clear that, so long as the Minister believes that he is implementing a European Community directive, he can overrule the Assembly. It is left to the Assembly to go to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council to argue that the Minister has misinterpreted his own action as an implementation of a directive and that it is in fact something else. I should be very grateful if the Minister could point out—although I very much doubt whether he will—any way in which it will fail to be a cause of continuing friction as EC directive after EC directive rains down on us and Ministers seek to implement them over the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Wigley: Perhaps I might start by responding briefly to the points raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) about the significance to the economy and the environment of Wales of developments that may be out to sea. An oil rig off the coast of Wales can have a significant bearing on the environment and possibly the economic prospects of the area. If it is within the 12-mile limit, the Assembly will have something to say about it, but if it is outside that limit, it may not. A difference of half a mile one way or another makes very little difference to the impact on the environment or the land. We need clarification of the role of the Assembly concerning developments beyond that limit.

I do not need to impress on Ministers the significance of drowning the valleys and extracting water from Wales. The way in which the Liverpool corporation took the Tryweryn valley, kicked out the residents of Capel Celyn and created a reservoir to provide water for industry on Merseyside without any recompense is probably one reason why three of the four hon. Members representing Gwynedd are from Plaid Cymru. The significance of that for the Assembly is very great indeed.

One of the many reasons for having a National Assembly for Wales is to ensure that there is a body to safeguard the land of Wales so that such action—which was contrary to the united view of Welsh Members of Parliament across party borders as they then were—can never again be taken. If the interpretation of the rules could allow the Secretary of State—perhaps of a different political colour—to intervene and overrule the National Assembly for Wales on the development of reservoirs, on augmenting existing reservoirs or on extracting water from rivers, as happens with the River Dee at the moment, that is very serious.

Paragraph 6 of the new schedule proposed by Lords amendment No. 170 seems quite clear. It states:

"Where it appears to the Secretary of State that the exercise of a relevant transferred environmental function . . . might have a serious adverse impact on . . . water resources . . . water supply . . . in England, he may intervene".

Sub-paragraph (2) continues:

"that function shall not in that case be exercisable by the Assembly."

In other words, the Assembly will not have that function.

Sub-paragraph (3) refers to part II of the Water Resources Act 1991, which states at section 19:

"It shall be the duty of the Authority to take . . . such action as it may from time to time consider . . . with the directions of the Secretary of State . . . for the purpose . . . of conserving, redistributing or otherwise augmenting water resources in England and Wales."

Section 20(2) provides that such arrangements

"may make provision, by virtue of subsection (1)(a) above, with respect to the construction or installation of any reservoirs, apparatus or other works."

If the Lords amendment goes through, the powers of the Assembly will be undermined. I want a lot of persuasion from the Minister that the Assembly will not lose vital powers that we hoped it would exercise.

5 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths: We have had a long and interesting debate. I shall try to sum up the significant issues. The National Assembly for Wales will be consulted about issues such as oil rigs, whether they are in the 12-mile limit or not. The Assembly will be able to exercise additional powers inside the 12-mile limit, but it will be consulted for oil rigs or gas installations on either side of the limit.

On the joint exercise of a power, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), if the Welsh Assembly does not agree with what the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food wants to do in England, it does not have to implement the proposal in Wales, so there is no problem. The issues of joint powers will be covered in the transfer orders, which will be available in the autumn. They can be considered in detail when they are debated early in the new year. If my hon. Friend or any other hon. Member wants to put any thoughts to us on transfer orders, we shall be pleased to consider them.

Water is an important issue. Part VI of the Water Industry Act 1991, which deals with water undertakers' powers to make compulsory purchase orders, is separate from the Water Resources Act 1991, which is mentioned in paragraph 6 of the new schedule. The National Assembly will decide about reservoirs and similar matters. Part VII of the Water Resources Act 1991 is about laying water pipes. The compulsory purchase power for reservoirs will lie with the National Assembly.

Mr. Wigley: I am sorry to press the issue, but I am referring to part II, not part VII. Part II makes it clear that people can augment the size of reservoirs. That can have a serious effect on the amount of water flowing in rivers, the amount of fishing and other issues. Will the National Assembly have control over that, or will there be override powers?

Mr. Griffiths: My information is that the power on issues relating to compulsory purchase of land for the provision of further reservoirs will lie with the National Assembly for Wales. Nobody will be able to create a reservoir in any part of Wales without obtaining permission. The issue that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to concerns the Environment Agency, which does not have the funds to build reservoirs, so there can be no question of a repetition of the Tryweryn situation, because the National Assembly for Wales will have the necessary powers.

The issue raised by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on the extent of transfers under paragraph 3 relates only to genuine cases of cross-border areas, covering parts of Cheshire and Herefordshire that adjoin Wales. No other part of England would be covered. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

I thank all hon. Members for contributing to this very interesting debate. I reassure them again that, under the National Assembly for Wales, the Tryweryn situation certainly could not arise. Any other issues of concern can be dealt with when we debate matters surrounding the transfer orders.

Question put, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 46.

Division No. 343] **[5.4 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*

Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John McFall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Dafis, Cynog
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Paisley, Rev Ian
Rendel, David
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Swinney, John
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones and
Mr. Lembit Öpik.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 2

MEMBERSHIP

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 2, line 14, leave out ("proceedings of") and insert ("anything done by")

5.15 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2, 4, 13, 17, 19, 23 to 25, 28 to 32, 37 to 44, 46 to 48, 50 to 53, 55 to 68, 70 to 81, 83 to 124, 127 to 143, 145, 147 to 150, 152 to 154, 156, 159, 160, 164 to 167, 171 to 185, 188, 189, 191, 193, 196 to 198, 200, 202, 204 to 206, 208 and 209.

Mr. Griffiths: At one time, I thought about speaking to each of the amendments individually, but, having taken soundings in the House, I find that there is general agreement that they are technical amendments, so I commend them all to the House.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): When lawyers hear words such as "technical" and "drafting", even the power of the Whips cannot prevent them from standing up to speak. I shall talk briefly about amendments Nos. 108,

109 and 111. When lawyers see phrases such as "Community law", they really start getting worried—or at least, some of them do.

Amendment No. 108, as contained in the booklet entitled, "Lords amendments to the Government of Wales Bill", would leave out the phrase "Community law or" from clause 108, in page 55, line 30. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Indeed; perhaps that is a good idea. The original clause 108 says:

"The Assembly has no power"

to do anything that is

"incompatible with Community law",

and the Lords amendment would take that out.

I do not know whether we are debating a wholesale repudiation of the acquis communautaire, or whatever that is in Welsh—or, for that matter, in English. Are we now debating the abrogation of the whole of the treaty of Rome? No doubt my hon. Friend the Minister will tell me that we are probably not. My first question is why—although I would welcome such a move—are we knocking out the words "Community law or", leaving clause 108 specifying only the European convention on human rights?

I may be wrong—I may be reading the wrong document—but I believe that amendment No. 109 to clause 108 would make an insertion that relates entirely to the European convention on human rights. Will my hon. Friend briefly explain that? I was intrigued because amendment No. 109 refers to subsection (1), but there is no subsection (1) in clause 108, at least not in my copy of the Bill. There are many versions of the Bill. I have No. 98. Perhaps clause 108(1) is in another version of the Bill.

Mr. Wigley: Yes.

Mr. Davies: I am glad that Plaid Cymru's legal advisers have kept the party up to speed on that.

Amendment No. 111 to clause 109 is very long and deals with many matters such as quantities relating to the United Kingdom, areas consisting of part of the United Kingdom, Community obligations and the Assembly's power. Again, I should be grateful if the Minister would briefly explain the amendment, because it makes no sense to me. It seems fairly complicated. That amendment also refers to subsection (1), but the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) tells me that that is all right.

Mr. Wigley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I do not want to delay the House by provoking the right hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* I can see that the Whips are very pleased with some of my remarks.

Subsection (1) is referred to, but I cannot find it in my copy of the Bill. I hope that I am not making life too difficult for my hon. Friend the Minister—I merely want to know what will happen to the acquis communautaire.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing those matters to my attention. One of the problems to which he has alluded is the many different versions of the Bill that have appeared over time. I reassure him that amendment No. 108 removes Community law from clause 108 because that is dealt with in clause 109. I refer my right hon. Friend to subsection (7) in amendment No. 111. That amendment refers to subsection (1) because clauses 108 and 109 have been transposed. Subsection (1) is what is currently the whole of clause 109. I said that these were technical amendments and, if there is any need for further correspondence on this matter, I shall be happy to help my right hon. Friend in that way.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): How will the Minister know whether legislation is incompatible with Community law? Clause 109(7) says that the Assembly can do nothing if legislation is incompatible. We should remember the Merchant Shipping Act 1988. We had to wait about eight years before we found out that the Act was incompatible with Community law. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) has contempt for such business. He used to be in favour of freedom and liberty—I wish that he still was.

Who will tell the Minister what legislation is incompatible? Will he telephone the Commission or the Foreign Office? How will he know what is incompatible when often we do not know that for many years, until the European Court tells us?

Mr. Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman is famous for his ability to grasp issues of Community law. Let me assure him that we shall seek advice from our lawyers on any such issue, so he need not lose any sleep.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 2, 4, 13, 17, 19, 23 to 26, 28 to 32, 34 to 48, 50 to 81, 83 to 124, 126 to 210 agreed to. [Some with Special Entry.]

Clause 54

ASSEMBLY FIRST SECRETARY AND ASSEMBLY SECRETARIES

Lords amendment: No. 49, in page 28, line 12, at end insert—

("( ) The Assembly First Secretary, and each of the Assembly Secretaries, is a Crown servant for the purposes of the Official Secrets Act 1989.")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Ron Davies.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendment No. 82.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I hope that, with the aid of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), I can persuade the House to disagree with Lords amendment No. 49.

The amendment is a response to what was clause 49 in the first version of the Bill that came before the House, which stated that, for the purposes of the Official Secrets Act 1989, all members of the Welsh Assembly should be Crown servants. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) accepted that that might be inappropriate. He gave assurances to the House that the Government would consider that and return with amendments in the House of Lords. They have done so,

[Mr. Richard Shepherd]

and now propose that only the First Secretary and other Secretaries—essentially the Executive Committee of the Welsh Assembly—should be Crown servants for the purposes of the Official Secrets Act.

The Under-Secretary—I take his views as having been sincerely expressed—has been concerned during his political career with the pervasiveness, extent and usage of the Official Secrets Act. I put it to the House that when one considers the nature, functions and duties of the Assembly, one wonders why any Official Secrets Act is necessary. The Government have advanced weak arguments here and in another place, where the amendment was moved.

The Government and the House accepted the necessity for an Official Secrets Act in respect of a restricted number of functions: defence, security, intelligence, foreign affairs and certain crime and investigative powers. None of those, per se, falls within the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly. They are, perhaps, relevant to the Secretary of State for Wales who sits in the British Cabinet, for whom those issues may arise, but in what respect would they arise for the democratically elected Assembly for Wales? The only example that the Under-Secretary gave the House, on 26 March, was the only relevant argument that he made. He said:

"Sensitive information might be provided to an Assembly Member, for example, on police investigations into allegations of child abuse in Wales. An Assembly Member, perhaps with responsibilities for social services on a subject committee, would properly have to have that information. However, he or she should be under an obligation not to disclose that information publicly."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 1998; Vol. 309, c. 727.]

He went on to say that the idea was not a novel one.

If one starts disinterring and asking what is behind this or why it is necessary, the example given is not necessarily appropriate. Many hon. Members will have served on county councils, local authorities and so on, where directors of social services are advised by the police in the course of their investigations as to sensitive matters. That does not require the Official Secrets Act or a swearing to it.

5.30 pm

All that I have ever asked the House since the Act came into being is that we should unpick the purpose behind it and ask why it is necessary. The Minister's argument does not stand up. Much confidential information that is exchanged would be covered by the Official Secrets Act. One of the problems that lies in the way that this is constructed is that the Minister is a Minister of the Crown. He may give information to Members of Parliament, or to anyone in society at large, but he is self-authorising, as long as it is within the construct of Cabinet policy. Who will self-authorise in a Welsh Assembly? The amendment is effectively gagging.

I simply ask the good people of Wales and of Britain how they can in conscience be bound when they come upon a piece of information that they profoundly believe is important to the well-being or safety of their constituents. I do not believe that they can be bound in those circumstances.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that, in the course of our work as Members of Parliament, we receive confidential information. I certainly have on occasions from the local police force. That does not make me a Crown servant or require me to comply with the Official Secrets Act.

Mr. Shepherd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for, in a sense, supporting an important contention.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): I think that we both agree that the Bill as amended by the other place is a huge improvement, and we welcome the Government's change of mind. The justification for the application of the Official Secrets Act, even to the Executive, needs to be stated explicitly. The hon. Gentleman's argument, with which I agree, is that there is much less justification for applying the Official Secrets Act even to members of the Executive, even to the First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly, than there is to Ministers of the Crown.

Mr. Shepherd: We do agree. On a quantum basis, it must be better that only the Executive of the Welsh Assembly is covered, rather than its totality, but the principle still remains. What is necessary to divide the Executive of the Welsh Assembly, whose members are elected on an equal franchise, different though it may be in type, from the other members of the Welsh Assembly?

In that context, other features of the Official Secrets Act are worrying. This is a life-long duty. A person who was a member of the Executive for perhaps only six months would, in theory, be bound thereafter until such time as he was released from that burden. Who releases people from that burden? None of them is self-authorising.

This is a battle that has been fought in Whitehall—I can see the nature of the civil service defending it—but, on the grounds advanced, the Minister did not give an instance that demonstrates why it is necessary to go to a democratically elected assembly. Nowhere else in the world do they try to impose this.

Lord Williams of Mostyn puts his finger on perhaps the critical reason. In a short debate, he accepted that the measure is unlikely to affect many issues or instances in the Assembly but, almost as a giveaway, he added:

"We believe that leading members of the assembly should be covered by the Act to permit a proper flow of information between civil servants and those with executive responsibilities."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 June 1998; Vol. 590, c. 354.]

That is one of the themes that have caused confusion, certainly to me, as to the status of the Welsh Assembly. What is its relationship to the Crown in Westminster? We know full well that the Crown is another way of saying the Prime Minister, Downing street, the Cabinet supported by a majority in the House of Commons. This is very much a subordinate body. We are asking to whom civil servants owe their duty of allegiance. Is it to the parliamentary apparatus headed by the Prime Minister, or to the Welsh Assembly?

The Government have just said that the Welsh Assembly is merely a Crown body, so perhaps it falls into that. In the course of Lord Mostyn's address—*[Interruption.]* I shall just finish this point—he advises us that the Scottish Executive, no less, not a Crown body, will also be subject to the Official Secrets Act. So much

for the claim of right where authority lies with the people. We again have the profound question: to whom do the civil servants owe their responsibilities and duties?

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): That is an acute question in Scotland. I apologise to the Whips, but this is a central matter. The truth is that Pandora's box has been opened and we want to know whether the Cabinet Secretary and the other senior civil servants have agreed to what will amount to a breakdown in discipline in the British civil service. That is the issue.

Mr. Shepherd: I appreciate that, and that is why I am concerned. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) wish to intervene?

Mr. Rogers: No, I wish to speak after the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Shepherd: I am concerned about this. The culture of secrecy is one side of the argument, against which I tried to fight, because, even in the example given by the Minister of child abuse in Wales, the culture of secrecy did not aid the revelation of what was going on. Would it not have been better if people had come forward, and more loudly, at an earlier stage, rather than everyone being silenced by an Official Secrets Act?

The arguments put forward by the Government in relation to the functions and purposes of the Official Secrets Act are not appropriate for Wales. What signal does that give to Wales? Where is the culture of openness, which is the Government's flagship, no less? I have always been a believer in freedom of information. I fought the new Official Secrets Act. It was brought in, I regret to say, partly in response to my endeavours to reform section 2. There is no reason why a democratic assembly should be subject to it, in a way that does not happen in the rest of the world. Its application to Scotland compounds that outrage.

As this is a Report stage, the Government must give detailed arguments as to why the measure is necessary. I rather suspect that it is that final point—that the civil servants would not owe their duty to Ministers and the Secretaries within the Parliament and the Assembly. Therefore, they have to draw Assembly leaders into the circle of secrecy. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Rhondda wish to intervene?

Mr. Rogers: I want to speak after the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Shepherd: It is on that basis that we would argue that we disagree with the Lords amendment.

Mr. Rogers: Like other Labour Members, I am concerned about this critical issue. The Welsh Assembly was supposed to mark the new millennium with a new open democracy, all inclusive, which the people of Wales could crawl all over every day to see what their elected representatives were doing. Now people have to sign the Official Secrets Act. I am confused about why. Why does it have to be applied?

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: I would rather not, because I want to continue with my argument. I have been a district and county councillor, a Member of the European Parliament and a Member of Parliament and, other than when I was in the Army as a lad, I never had to sign an Official Secrets Act. No Member of Parliament has signed it, except for Ministers of the Crown and those who are on the Intelligence and Security Committee, but that Committee is most peculiar, as it deals with national security.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: No. I want to finish. Hon. Members on the Intelligence and Security Committee have to sign the Act for specific reasons, but why should Assembly Members have to sign it? *[Interruption.]* I wish that the Deputy Chief Whip would let me make my speech. If he wants, I shall continue for an hour and a half—I shall make my point, as it is important. Why should Assembly Members have to sign the Act?

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): They do not.

Mr. Rogers: As I understand it, and as the Government briefing suggests, the provision will apply only to members of the Assembly Executive Committee, who will be Members of the Welsh Assembly. I do not suppose that the Secretary of State will deny that, unless he intends that the Executive Committee be made up of people from the arts and television. Why will members of the Executive have to sign the Act? Will they be privy to national secrets? As far as I can see, the Assembly will be only a glorified county council carrying out administrative functions. It will not indulge in any secret exercises.

As the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said, people who are on county councils—chairmen and members of social services committee—deal with confidential information on child abuse cases. People who sit on education committees receive information on what happens in the education service, but they do not have to sign the Act, so why must members of the Assembly Executive Committee?

Mr. Öpik: Liberal Democrats, too, believe that we are discussing a matter of principle, but I want to put on the record our welcome for the fact that the Government have listened to the representations made during consideration of the Bill. The Official Secrets Act 1989 will now be restricted to the Assembly First Secretary and Assembly Secretaries, so it behoves us to acknowledge the fact that progress has been made. I have always found Ministers at the Welsh Office honest and open; I do not for a moment think that such individuals would need to be bound, even if they were to end up in the Welsh Assembly—I make the possible exception of cases that relate to the Powys health trust, which I must mention yet again.

Nevertheless, the Government have failed to make the assumption—which we must all make—that people who are elected to the Assembly will be honourable; we shall be able to be trust them to keep their mouths shut and not breach confidentiality without the threat of criminal proceedings. The provision on the Official Secrets Act is inappropriate, given the commitment—which I believe to be genuine—to government that is more open and does not depend on threats of prosecution to make people behave responsibly.

[Mr. Öpik]

We recognise that progress has been made, but we echo the comments of hon. Members on both sides of the House that it is inappropriate to impose the Official Secrets Act on Assembly Members. We strongly encourage the Government to listen to what we say. We want the Assembly to be an open book with a few private notes rather than a closed book with many hidden chapters.

Sir Teddy Taylor: As one of the hon. Members who tabled the amendment, I want to make a few brief points that I hope the House will bear in mind. When the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) said that Assembly Members would have to sign the Official Secrets Act 1989, his comments were met with contempt by Ministers—the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), seemed to shake his head as if to say rubbish. However, way back on 26 March, the Government were proposing that every Assembly Member should sign the Act. On that occasion, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and I tabled an amendment to point out that the proposal was an outrage.

Mr. Shepherd: In fact, the proposal was much worse; not only did Assembly Members have to sign the Act, but that was mandated by a Westminster statute—they had no alternative. To say that they were required to sign it suggests that they could have said, "I don't wish to sign it." The statute will now affect only the Executive of the Assembly, but it was intended to apply to all Assembly Members by fiat.

Sir Teddy Taylor: How right my hon. Friend is. The Government had proposed that, unlike all other democratic assemblies of which I know, the provision would apply to all Members. Happily, a minor change has been made.

On 26 March, I asked why the measure would apply to Wales but not to the Scottish Parliament. The Under-Secretary seemed to have acquired a delightful new interest in democracy, so I was staggered when, a few weeks later on 5 June, it was announced in the House of Lords that the provision would apply to the Scottish Parliament.

5.45 pm

Mr. Grieve: The simple answer to why that was been done must be that the Government believe that it is impossible to govern across the United Kingdom without the exchange of secrets between themselves and those in office in Wales and Scotland. That, of course, strikes at the root of democracy; the provision fetters those in the Scottish Parliament and in the Welsh Assembly, preventing them from responding to the needs of their electorates.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I am delighted to hear those words from my hon. Friend. I look forward to his joining me in the battle for democracy whether we have a Conservative or Labour Government—that will be great news for democracy.

I make a point of not attacking people in the House, but I hope that the Under-Secretary—not the Secretary of State, for whom I have a high regard—will appreciate that he was regarded as someone who would fight for liberty and for people's rights. However, he defended a proposal that would apply the Official Secrets Act to every Assembly Member.

What secrets are involved? The impression may be created that the Government are thinking only of massive issues, but that is wrong. I urge hon. Members to consider what respected members of their parties said when the Official Secrets Act was passed. Roy Hattersley, for example, pointed out that it applied not only to big issues, but to every piece of paper marked confidential or above. We were told that there would be a harm test, but, sadly, that does not work.

I hope that hon. Members will also ask themselves what the blazes they would do if they were Executive Members of the Assembly and found a United Kingdom Government or European Union document that contained scandals or abuses that would damage Wales—not England or necessarily Britain, but specifically Wales. Under the provision, Executive Members of the Assembly would not be allowed to refer to such a document in any way. Members of the Executive should be fighting for Wales, so why should they not be able to reveal information about a new policy that would hit Wales hard?

The Government should appreciate that the Welsh Assembly is not a branch or subsidiary part of the UK Government but something separate. I did not want a Scottish Parliament or a Welsh Assembly, but, as we are now to have them, we must appreciate that their task is to fight for Scotland and for Wales. Unfortunately, by applying the Official Secrets Act, the Government are giving the impression that they regard the Welsh Assembly as a branch of their operation. The provision is wrong and unnecessary, and I believe that we should accept the Lords amendment. The Official Secrets Act should not apply—the proposal is an insult not only to Wales, but to democracy.

Mr. Ron Davies: I understand that the House wishes to reach a swift conclusion, so I shall curtail my remarks. I compliment the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) on the way in which he presented his case. I pay tribute to him, and to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) for the way in which they have consistently argued their case. Their beliefs are genuine, but wrong; I shall briefly explain why.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills correctly described the history of this debate. The last time it occurred in this House, on Report, the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), said that the Government intended to give further consideration to the matter. We tabled amendments in the other place, which were discussed there, and we now propose to agree with those amendments.

The Bill, as amended, provides that the Assembly First Secretary and the Assembly Secretaries are to be Crown servants for the purposes of the Official Secrets Act. As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers), the provision does not apply to Assembly Members per se. The proposal is consistent with our

earlier debates on the issue. Assembly Secretaries will be acting in a quasi-ministerial role and might, from time to time, need to be entrusted with classified information within the meaning of the Act. Lord Williams and police investigations into child abuse were cited, and there are other instances in which classified information might have to be given to Ministers.

The amendment is also essential if Assembly Secretaries are to discharge their responsibilities to the Assembly in European and other international negotiations. If Assembly Secretaries were not bound by the Act, it is quite possible that a Minister of the Crown would be legally unable to share information about such negotiations with them. That would leave the Assembly unable to use the powers available to it to address many matters of vital interest to Wales.

The House will recall that, on Report, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), who was then Opposition Front-Bench spokesman on constitutional matters, with his hon. Friends tabled amendments that were identical in effect to the amendment before us now; so did the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), his hon. Friends and my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek). It is therefore reasonable to assume that amendment No. 49 fully reflects a cross-party consensus in the House. I noted with interest the support for the Government's position expressed by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). There is a cross-party consensus—one to which the Government rightly responded in the other place. I might add that the amendment was warmly welcomed by the Conservative Front Benchers in the other place. I trust that Conservatives in this House share that view.

If the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills gets his way and the amendment is not accepted, members of the Executive Committee will be seriously hampered in their work. They might well be unable to discuss matters of crucial interest to Wales with Ministers of the Crown. They would also have to assent to conditions imposed by civil servants on each and every occasion that they required access to classified material. That would be both inefficient and a distortion of the proper relationship between senior elected Members and their officials.

Mr. Shepherd: It is perfectly true that the then Conservative Front-Bench team and the Liberal Democrats in the other place supported the amendment. However, the Secretary of State should remember that there is a fall-back position from the totalitarian grasp whereby everybody is covered by the Act. Even in the House of Commons, we had a fall-back position. The Secretary of State will have noticed that the Conservative Front Benchers in this place supported the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), so the right hon. Gentleman should not over-emphasise that point.

This is meant to be an intelligent debate in which we test the arguments being advanced. We are hopeful that, when the Bill returns to the Lords, the Government will have reflected on the issue, but it does not sound as though they will, from the Secretary of State's speech.

Mr. Davies: Like the Conservative party, we are a listening Government, and it would be wrong of me not to say that we shall listen carefully to all the comments that have been made. However, I cannot hold out any prospects, because the matter has been debated and we listened carefully when it was considered on Report. We made a sensible amendment in the other place, and the provision that we now have reflects the need to ensure that the Assembly can conduct its business properly.

If we were to remove the amendment, that would cause considerable doubt about how the Official Secrets Act applied to the Assembly in the conduct of its business. It is possible that, without there being any provision on the face of the Bill, the courts might look at clause 1(3), which gives the Assembly Crown status, and conclude that all Assembly Members were bound by the Act as Crown servants. That is precisely the opposite of what the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills wants.

I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman seeks to re-run this argument and to overturn an amendment that I genuinely believe improves the Bill and reflects a cross-party consensus both here and in the other place. I am also disappointed that, in so doing, he would leave the Executive Committee in doubt as to its status and hampered in its work. I urge the House to reject the hon. Gentleman's motion and to agree with the Lords in the amendment.

Mr. Shepherd: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to respond to the Secretary of State's speech.

I have to say that, no, I do not accept the Secretary of State's argument. I could have written his brief—indeed, it could have been written at any time in the 18 years of the previous Government. No instance—not one—was given of a case where the ability of the Welsh Assembly to address the matters relevant to its remit as a Crown body was constrained. There was only a generality of arguments. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I contended that the European dimension—information exchanged between Governments in confidence—would be excluded from the knowledge of the Welsh Assembly. It clearly is of some importance to the Welsh Assembly.

The measure sends out entirely the wrong signals: there is no need for it, and the Government have not made a case for it. I apologise for not having been present on 3 May when the amendment in my name was debated. I was in Canada, meeting the commissioner for freedom of information. The Bill as it stands is truly unsatisfactory. It does not reflect the position of the Opposition, because one key element is missing from the Official Secrets Act—there is no public interest defence.

My rational final point for the Government to consider is to ask how they could seriously mount a prosecution. I shall take an outside-world case, that the leader of the SNP is a Member of the Scottish Parliament and information comes to him that there is something perverse or wrong about Dounreay. What law in the land could hold or bind a man of conscience who wanted to bring to public notice such a threat or fear? No prosecution could succeed. The trouble with the old Official Secrets Act was that it had fallen into disrepute, and the new Act was an attempt to modernise its provisions.

There is no purpose behind the amendment. I am sorry that there was only a three-column debate in the House of Lords, because the issue requires proper reflection. The new Labour Government are sworn to openness; I believe

[Mr. Shepherd]

that, in the past, the words "unbundle Britain" have been used by a right hon. Labour Member. I believe in the democratic rights of the people because of the oldest argument of all: how can we reason but from what we know? A Welsh democratically elected Assembly should be party to the information that is important to the government of Wales.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords Amendment No. 82 agreed to.

Clause 4

VOTING AT ORDINARY ELECTIONS

Lords amendment: No. 3, in page 2, line 42, leave out from ("have") to end of line 9 on page 3 and insert

("one vote (referred to in this Act as a constituency vote).

(2) The constituency vote is to be given for a candidate to be the Assembly member for the Assembly constituency.

(3) There shall also be calculated the number of additional member votes for each registered political party which has submitted a list of candidates to be Assembly members for the Assembly electoral region in which the Assembly constituency is included.

(3A) The number of additional member votes for each party shall be the same as the number of constituency votes for the candidate of the party in that constituency.")

Mr. Ron Davies: I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 5 to 12, 14 to 16, 18 and 20, each with Government motion to disagree, No. 21, amendment (a) thereto and No. 22, with Government motion to disagree.

Mr. Davies: I believe that it is the mood of the House to move quickly on these matters—

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Not any more.

Mr. Davies: Fine. In that case, it appears that we have a considerable amount of time in which to develop interesting and persuasive arguments. I look forward to a lengthy exchange on the amendments.

The amendments, which were introduced in the other place to change the additional member system from a two-vote ballot to a single-vote ballot, are fundamentally flawed. They are undemocratic and discriminatory. I believe that the House has a moral obligation to overturn the amendments and to restore unfettered democratic choice to the Welsh electorate.

I remind the House that the White Paper "A Voice for Wales" spelled out clearly that the electoral arrangements for the Assembly would be based on electors having two votes. The additional member system, as proposed for the Assembly by the Government—and endorsed by the electorate in the referendum—would give voters two votes. It is worth reminding the House that, before the election, there was broadly based agreement that that form of electoral system was necessary for the Assembly. Agreement was sufficiently broadly based so that all Members of Parliament elected at the last election to represent Welsh constituencies subscribed to it in their national manifestos.

At its conference in March 1997, the Labour party unanimously agreed that that was the system we wanted. I had many discussions with Alex Carlile, the former Liberal Democrat leader in Wales, and I know that he broadly accepted the proposal, as did the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and his party. I acknowledge that there were some differences, and that some amendments were required, but there was broadly based consensus that the additional member system was necessary in order to introduce the form of plurality into the Welsh Assembly that that new democratic institution demanded.

6 pm

There was broadly based agreement in 1997, and the people of Wales obviously accepted that view at the general election, because they voted to elect in each of the 40 Welsh constituencies Members of Parliament whose national manifestos supported the additional member system. I am sure that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) does not want to re-run the referendum, even at this late stage. However, those proposals were put before the people of Wales in that referendum of 18 September last year, and they endorsed them. The House should consider that point very carefully.

The Government propose that electors should have two votes. The first would be for the constituency Member, elected by the first-past-the-post system under the traditional method. The second would be for a party list or independent candidate—that is particularly important in rural Wales; I know that Conservative Members do not understand the politics of rural Wales, so I urge them to reflect carefully on this point—

Mr. Letwin: We have.

Mr. Davies: I am being uncharacteristically generous to the hon. Gentleman.

The second vote would be for a party list or independent candidate, and would determine the four additional Members for the voter's electoral region. Under our proposals, voters would be given the right to choose whom they vote for in both the constituency and the electoral region.

It is quite possible that voters would take two separate decisions: they might decide to support one candidate in the constituency section and a party in the regional list. That is common practice in Wales. Indeed, at the last election, I venture to suggest that there was a great deal of tactical voting. The people of Wales regard that as a great success, because they got rid of all Conservative Members of Parliament for Wales. I can understand why the Conservative party is loth to see the development of any electoral system that empowers people to get rid of Conservative candidates, but that is the reality of politics in Wales.

The other place has chosen to deny that choice to the people of Wales, and that issue is at the heart of our debate. The amendments introduced there allow voters one vote only—they deny the opportunity for a second vote—for the constituency ballot. Under those

arrangements, a voter wishing to express a choice for the regional candidates can vote only for a constituency candidate from a party that has also put forward a party list.

I shall give an example from my constituency. A vote for the Conservative candidate in Caerphilly—a rare prospect, one might imagine, but it is nevertheless technically possible—would register automatically as a vote for the Conservative party list for the whole south Wales east electoral region. I am prepared to acknowledge that some of my constituents might choose to vote Conservative as an alternative to voting for the Labour candidate—they may be instinctively inclined to support Labour but have some difficulty supporting the Labour candidate in Caerphilly.

However, under those circumstances, it would be wrong to assume that they would always vote Conservative, and to tot up those votes for the Conservative party. However, that is precisely the effect of the amendment that the House of Lords invites us to accept. The voter would not have the option to vote for the list of a different party.

The consequence of the single vote system is that the four additional Members elected from each of the five regions will be elected indirectly. That makes a total of 20 indirectly elected Assembly Members from a total of only 60. Under the proposals endorsed by the electorate in the referendum, the additional Members would each receive a separate mandate from electors choosing to support their party.

The question arises under the Lords amendments: to whom would those Members be accountable? Would they be accountable to the electorate, or to the constituency Members in their regions for whom the votes were cast directly? If the hon. Member for West Dorset reflects on that point, he will see that that is precisely the logic behind the House of Lords suggestion.

The provisions inserted in the other place are discriminatory. They discriminate against small parties. That may concern the Conservative party, because, according to the latest evidence, it is the smallest party in Wales. Conservative Members should reflect carefully on the prospect of suffering more self-inflicted damage. The provisions also discriminate against independent candidates—that point concerns me, as I am sure that the Conservative party can look after itself—and against elector choice.

For smaller parties, which are unlikely to win any constituency seats, the best chance of winning seats is through the electoral region. Under these arrangements, to have any chance of winning additional member seats in a region, a party would have to put forward candidates in all constituencies within that region. That is manifestly unfair in the case of parties such as the Green party. It would mean putting up between seven and nine constituency candidates per region, which would be a tremendous strain on the finances and resources of those small parties.

Why should smaller parties be obliged to overreach themselves and compete in the most unfavourable circumstances? Having looked closely at the arguments made in the other place, I can conclude only that it is simply because the Conservatives have a fertile imagination.

In our previous debates, and in the other place, Conservative Front Benchers sought to suggest that the electoral system proposed by the Government would distinguish between the status of Members voted for at the constituency level and those from the list. That will not be the case. However, the amendments made by the other place offer the clearest indication that the official Opposition want to have second-class Members of the Assembly. That is unacceptable to the Government.

The Conservative spokesman in the other place made much of the possibility of collusion by political parties—even though the House and the other place have put it on record that the parties will not entertain any such suggestion. I give the hon. Member for West Dorset an assurance that there will be no collusion by my party or by any persons standing as Labour party candidates.

I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the fact that the Labour party made a momentous decision in moving away from a system that had served us well, guaranteed us a majority and denied the Conservative party a majority in Wales every since the secret ballot was introduced in the last century. It was a momentous decision to move to a system that guaranteed fairer representation for all political parties in Wales.

It is a travesty of politics in Wales to suggest that, having moved from that position, the Labour party would seek deliberately to collude or enter into underhanded arrangements that would deny the effect of our proposed change. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on that point. The amendments made by the Lords offer the clearest indication that the official Opposition want to create suspicion.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): How does the Secretary of State define "collusion"? For the sake of clarity, when he says that the Labour party will not collude, to what is he referring specifically?

Mr. Davies: I am happy to explain, because this was the subject of some discussion in the House of Lords. The hon. Gentleman's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), also raised the issue, and I gave him a similar assurance.

For example, it was suggested that the Labour party would put up candidates in the south Wales east region to contest all the constituencies quite properly on a first-past-the-post basis, but would not enter any candidates for the additional member seats, putting forward instead candidates standing in the name of the Co-operative party. The Co-operative party is part of the Labour party. The suggestion is that we would then encourage Labour voters not to vote for the Labour candidate—there would not be one—but to vote for the Co-operative party candidate and that, after the election, the Co-operative party candidate would form an immediate one-party alliance with the Labour party.

It has been suggested that we would not put forward candidates in mid and west Wales, for example, but would choose individuals who were known to be Labour party supporters, and that the party machine would support them as independent candidates. Immediately after the election of the Assembly, those independent candidates would automatically take the whip of the Labour party.

[Mr. Davies]

Such collusion is technically possible, which is why I want to assure the House that, as far as I am concerned—as Secretary of State for Wales, I have some influence in these matters—there will be no such collusion when we fight the election.

Dr. Fox: Although I accept the Secretary of State's assurance—I give the same assurance on behalf of the Conservative party—we cannot speak for other parties. The Secretary of State admits that collusion is possible. Does he not therefore think that there should be a provision in the Bill to prevent such activity?

Mr. Davies: That may be so, but the proposal that we are discussing strikes at the very heart of the democratic arrangements. It does not achieve the objective that the Opposition seek to achieve, but strikes out the principle of proportionality in the electoral system. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's assurance that there will be no collusion by the Conservative party, but I must tell him in a spirit of friendship that I would not mind if the Conservative party did collude, because, according to the latest information available, even with collusion the Conservatives would be unlikely to win many seats in the Welsh Assembly.

The Conservatives are not really afraid of the possibility of collusion—that is a smokescreen; their real fear is that there is such a broad-based consensus in Wales that people will choose to vote for, dare I say it, a Liberal Democrat candidate in Brecon and Radnor if they feel that that vote is most likely to succeed in getting rid of the Conservatives.

In exactly the same way, it is clear that, in the 1997 election, a range of people who were broadly left of centre in Monmouth, Vale of Glamorgan or Vale of Clwyd were prepared to support the Labour candidate, because they thought that that was the best way to guarantee getting rid of what they considered to be a discredited and unacceptable Conservative party candidate. They wanted a Tory-free Wales, and to set Wales on the path of creating a new democracy.

That actually happened. We cannot quantify it, because I can give no direct evidence to the Opposition, but I know from my experience of canvassing in Brecon and Radnor—Montgomery was not top of the Labour party's hit list at the last election—where I spent many happy days trying to persuade people to vote Labour, that many people told me that the only way to get rid of the dreadful, rotten, corrupt, incompetent and feckless Conservative Government was to vote for the Liberal Democrat candidate, even though they did not admire his personal qualities.

Mr. Letwin: I wonder whether the Secretary of State has understood what he has just said. If the amendment were accepted and people were to follow the tactic that he describes, that would do worse damage to the Tory cause than the system that he proposes.

Mr. Davies: That intervention shows how difficult the Conservative party finds it to come into touch with the reality of modern politics. I do not regard the electoral system as something that should be constructed in order to advance the interests of my political party. Politics in Wales has moved on from that.

The hon. Gentleman clearly cannot understand that I want a system that ensures that the 20 per cent. of people in Wales who voted Conservative at the last election are properly represented in the Assembly if they choose to vote Conservative again. I do not want them to vote Conservative, and will do all I can by argument and campaigning to prevent them from doing so, but if they choose to vote for the Conservative party, they should be represented in the Assembly.

Mr. Letwin: As Secretary of State, the right hon. Gentleman owes it to the House to maintain some intellectual integrity in this argument. Did he not argue that the Conservative party was supporting the amendment not because we were concerned about alter ego parties but because we were trying to preserve ourselves against the circumstances that he described? He should have the grace to admit that that argument is wholly fallacious, because the amendment makes our position under those circumstances worse, and we must therefore have a different motive—genuinely to prevent the problem of alter ego parties.

Mr. Davies: I do not accept that. I am trying to save the Conservative party from itself. The hon. Gentleman must understand that these moments of generosity are few and far between, so I urge the Conservatives—

Mr. Grieve *rose—*

6.15 pm

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman sit down? He has now been in the House long enough to know that, when someone is responding to an intervention, it is courteous and sensible to allow that intervention to be dealt with before making another. If he will contain himself for a moment, I shall finish dealing with the previous intervention.

This is a serious matter. We are trying to construct a new form of inclusive democracy in Wales, and the Conservative party seeks to strike at the heart of the electoral arrangements that we propose.

Mr. Grieve: Does the Secretary of State agree that the alternative way of viewing the matter is that he is concerned for the time when the worm turns? When the worm turns, his party might be at a disadvantage in Wales.

Mr. Davies: It is quite clear that I am wasting my time. Despite my best efforts and those of all political parties in Wales, the Conservatives refuse to be brought into touch with the reality of modern politics. I am not concerned about the time, in five, 10 or 15 years, when the electoral cycle has moved on and the Labour party has 40 seats rather than the current 34. When that happens, we shall have to grin and bear it, with fortitude and good humour.

I know that the electoral cycle swings. Hon. Members must now recognise that we have a broad-based consensus. The last election was fought on that basis, as was the referendum—

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) *rose*—

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman should contain himself, because it is possible to strain my tolerance and good humour. If anybody can do so, it is the hon. Gentleman.

As I was saying, we have a broad-based consensus. The House of Commons passed the Bill with a record majority of 220. It was accepted in Committee, and there were never any questions about it, but we are now faced with the prospect of the House of Lords striking out a measure that is at the heart of the creation of the Welsh Assembly.

I shall give way to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), but, as the House wants to listen to the views of other hon. Members, I should like to make some progress thereafter.

Mr. Swayne: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the consensus cannot be judged to last for ever. The undertaking that he has so willingly given that none of the parties present will indulge in so-called "split ticket voting" cannot be held as a guarantee for ever. We are simply trying to put in place processes that will prevent that once the electoral cycle has moved on. If the right hon. Gentleman does not like the measures that we propose, should he not think of other more appropriate measures to put in the Bill?

Mr. Davies: I have thought of other more appropriate measures. They were put in my party's manifesto at the last election, and we won 34 out of 40 parliamentary seats in Wales. The other parties with similar proposals also won the confidence of the majority of the people of Wales.

The Conservative party, which was the only one trying to defend the status quo—it was stuck in a time warp, and was not prepared to move on to a new form of inclusive, rational, sane, democratic politics—paid the price. The people endorsed our proposals again in the referendum, and this House has endorsed them. What we are now seeing is Conservative Front-Bench Members trying to justify a measure that was inserted against their better judgment in the House of Lords. I want to move on now, if I may.

The Lords amendments are driven by party self-interest. The last thing that the official Opposition want is the people of Wales to be able fully to exercise their democratic rights—they fully realise the difficulties that befell them at the general election. I would not dispute the intelligence of the United Kingdom electorate, and we should leave it to them, not to a diktat from the Conservative party, to decide who they want to represent them in the Assembly.

The changes would discriminate against independent candidates by denying them the opportunity to stand in an electoral region, and by undermining their chances in individual constituencies. The single vote system would mean that anyone who voted in a constituency for an independent candidate would not register a vote in the indirect election of the additional members.

How many voters who might vote for an independent in their constituency would do so when they realised that they would disfranchise themselves in the regional election? Very few, which is where the Lords amendment would discriminate so directly and blatantly against independent candidates. It is important in politics, certainly in rural Wales, that individual candidates should be able to come forward.

I do not understand why the Conservative party wants to impose such draconian restrictions on small parties such as the Green party and on the independents, especially when the Conservative party faces the prospect of becoming an even smaller party. I do not understand why voters should not be able to vote for one party in a constituency and for the list of another party in the electoral region. That is the heart of the arrangements we propose. Ours is a democracy of long standing, and we have a mature electorate who are well able to take responsible decisions for themselves.

Lords amendment No. 21 greatly extends the reference in respect of the party list to be used in the event of a vacancy in a party list seat. It is otiose. The original drafting made it perfectly clear which was the relevant list, and did so quite succinctly. The Government amendment to Lords amendment No. 21 will restore the clarity of the provision. I urge the House to overturn these amendments and to agree to the Government amendment to Lords amendment No. 21.

Mr. Letwin: It is extraordinary that the Secretary of State should engage in political knockabout in a discussion of a serious constitutional issue. I do not say that it is the biggest constitutional issue that has ever hit the face of the earth, but it is significant and he should take the argument seriously.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who briefly graced us with his presence, presumably found the Secretary of State's remarks too difficult to swallow and left. During proceedings on the Registration of Political Parties Bill, the Under-Secretary was good enough frequently to acknowledge the seriousness of the question of alter ego parties—what the Secretary of State calls collusion. Although the Under-Secretary found it difficult to accept amendments because they would not have been effective against the problem, he made it clear that he hoped that the Government would seek measures to prevent such abuse.

We have before us a clear case. We did not invent the idea of introducing the alternative member system to the Welsh Assembly—the Government did that. Nor does the Lords amendment, despite the Secretary of State's amusing efforts to make it seem so, in any way militate against the integrity of that system. On the contrary, it retains all the ability for top-up to occur, one way or another, to the advantage of whatever party it might be.

Mr. Win Griffiths: There has been an additional member system in Germany for many years. Can the hon. Gentleman cite one example, or even a handful, of where such a thing has happened in the German body politic? I cannot think of any.

Mr. Letwin: That is an interesting point which has been much discussed. So far as we are aware, there are no examples at national level, in Germany or elsewhere, of parties engaging in alter ego activities. At lander level, there have been some such suggestions and attempts, although I understand that none were brought to fruition. The Secretary of State and the Minister are relying on the proposition that the same discipline will apply in Wales. We do not say that it may not apply; it may, but there is no reason on earth not to have an amendment or a rule preventing that occurrence.

The Secretary of State and the Minister presumably agree with the Under–Secretary of State for the Home Department that this is a serious problem which needs tackling. *[Interruption.]* If the Secretary of State is saying from a sedentary position that the Lords amendment has other disadvantages which outweigh its advantage of removing the alter ego party problem, it would have been better if he had couched his speech in such terms. It would then have been intellectually respectable and we could have come to the arguments about whether the Lords amendment has other disadvantages which outweigh its advantage.

If the Secretary of State had thought through the issue and come to such a conclusion, he should have brought forward alternative methods, as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) said when he was taxing the Secretary of State's patience from the Back Benches. Alternative methods were discussed in the other place, such as rules about having to be represented in both parts of the voting. Those were not pressed, but it is entirely possible for the Secretary of State to come back with a better version of a rule to prevent alter ego party activities.

Mr. Ron Davies: Yes, of course, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman now understands this matter does not tax us greatly. If there is a responsibility on anyone, it is on the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to introduce a proposition to deal with the problem. They have not done that. The responsibility is theirs, if they believe that the Bill needs improvement. We do not.

Mr. Letwin: Our noble Friends in the other place have introduced exactly such a proposition to solve that problem. To move to the Secretary of State's serious arguments, he claims that it has other disadvantages. *[Interruption.]* Well, let us go through what those other huge, serious problems are meant to be.

The Secretary of State told us that the Lords amendment was flawed, undemocratic and discriminatory. The arguments that he put forward boiled down to one thing: he claimed that, although the single vote proposition would cure the alter ego problem, it would cause difficulties for smaller parties. Let us examine what he means by that proposition.

Mr. Ron Davies: I said more than that.

Mr. Letwin: I do not think that the Secretary of State said any more than that; he simply said it several different ways.

Mr. Ron Davies: So that there is no misunderstanding, I made it absolutely clear that the purpose of the additional member system is to create a new inclusive politics with parties receiving representation in accordance with the percentage of the vote that they receive from the electorate.

Mr. Letwin: I fear that I have overrated the Secretary of State. I had thought that he was engaging in political knockabout because he well understood the point and was merely having fun at our expense, but it appears that he is genuinely under a misapprehension. Let me explain; the single vote proposition maintains entirely the integrity of the inclusive politics to which he is so attached.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: The hon. Gentleman represents the small party in Wales.

Mr. Letwin: I am leaving aside the question of the smaller parties, but I shall return to it.

The single vote proposition leaves entirely intact the proposition that a party that receives N per cent. of the vote will receive N per cent. of the representation, barring the question of the divisors. It would make no change in that, so we are left with the Secretary of State's one serious point: does the Lords amendment in any way seriously militate against smaller parties?

I shall distinguish between two kinds of smaller party, although the Secretary of State did not do so clearly until the end of his remarks. On the one hand, there are parties that are small because they have small popular appeal in Wales, or in a region of Wales, and do not have much money. On the other, there are genuine Independents, or the party sole—a person who wants to stand in a particular constituency and does not have a party behind him.

The Secretary of State succeeded in muddling the two cases virtually entirely, but let me try to disentangle them. He alluded to the Green party, but I shall start with the Conservative party, which he says is a smaller party. I assure him that rules which meant that the Conservative party had to put up candidates in all seats would pose us no problem. We are quite up to that job. I am grateful to him for his concern for us, but we can look after ourselves. I venture that every other party represented in the House is in a similar position, so there is no question of discrimination against major political parties in Wales or elsewhere.

What are we asking of the Green party in the single vote proposition? We are asking it to risk its deposit in a number of seats to benefit from the top-up, which occurs through the single vote mechanism. The only difference between the Lords amendment and the Bill is that Green party deposits would be put at risk. It has regularly run candidates who clearly stood in the greatest possible danger of losing their deposits, but that did not stop them. I do not think that the Green party would have the slightest difficulty in putting up candidates, but, if the Secretary of State thinks that a serious problem exists, it falls to him to table an amendment to reduce the amount of the deposit. That would be a legitimate tactic, and it would be a conclusive answer to his argument. In fact, the right hon. Gentleman's argument has only a monetary aspect—nothing else that he has said carries the slightest credence—and, if he is worried about money, he can deal with that in a way that we would doubtless accept.

6.30 pm

Let us now turn to the other part of the argument. The Secretary of State managed to confuse it with something else, but it is the beginning of a shred of a serious argument against the single-vote amendment—the only one that I have heard so far. I refer to the question of an Independent who wishes to stand for a particular seat. The Secretary of State said, or at least tried to say, that the amendment posed a problem for such an Independent. He seemed to be arguing that voters who were really Labour voters—to be generous, as he would say—but who happened to like Mr. X, an Independent, would be disinclined to vote for Mr. X, knowing that their vote, as a Labour vote, would not be added to the total number of Labour votes in terms of the additional member list and that they would not have expressed their preference for the Labour party to have a large proportion of the total number of votes in the Assembly. I suppose that the Secretary of State was trying to say that people would be more inclined to vote for the Labour candidate, and that would be unfair on the Independent candidate.

It is uncharacteristically generous—or perhaps I should be more generous myself, and say that it is characteristically generous—of the Secretary of State to be so concerned about Independents, who, in general, would militate against the Labour party's success in Wales. I must add, however, that, if an Independent stood any serious chance of winning a seat, it is very unlikely that people would refuse to support him for tactical reasons, simply to ensure that their vote—which, necessarily, would constitute only a small part of the total—was registered in the additional member list for the party of their choice. The Secretary of State's argument is extraordinarily tenuous.

This, I think, is the structure of that argument: is the slight disadvantage accruing to the Independent member enough, in the view of any reasonable person, to outweigh the huge advantage recognised by his Home Office colleague of preventing for all time the alter ego party problem, which could distort the result absolutely?

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman has ignored one of the key reasons why the Liberal Democrats supported the change: proportional representation. Will he confirm that one of the factors that simply do not matter to the Tories is the introduction of proportional representation as an electoral system, and that he and his party do not recognise the importance of the pluralism that proportional representation will necessarily introduce in Wales?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman, who is a reasonable person, must have misunderstood the way in which the amendment is intended to work. Let me explain slowly, in the genuine hope that I can persuade the hon. Gentleman that he is under a misapprehension.

Mr. Öpik *rose—*

Mr. Letwin: May I explain? Then I will give way again.

In the single-vote system proposed in the amendment, those who vote for a candidate who is or is not successful—in other words, all who vote for all candidates in all constituencies—add to the total of votes for their party. Thus, eventually, there will be a system of proportional representation through the additional member list, as intended by the Government and by my party, which will not be compromised by the amendment.

Mr. Öpik: To save the hon. Gentleman any more bother, let me say that I am perfectly aware of what his proposal seeks to do. Does he not understand, however, that the system he proposes is not a system of proportional representation? As many hon. Members have pointed out, it will be skewed by the preference for individual candidates, unrelated to their political parties. Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that the system he is proposing depends less on party preference than on other factors that will hopelessly skew the proportional-representation outcome that every other hon. Member wants?

Mr. Letwin: I did the hon. Gentleman an injustice. I understand his argument now. He is saying that the amendment would distort the proportions that would otherwise obtain. His argument is an elaboration, or indeed a stronger version, of the Secretary of State's argument. Perhaps he should swap places with the Secretary of State in order to present it properly.

The hon. Gentleman's argument is that the proportions would be distorted, because preferences for particular candidates in particular seats would enter into the equation of apparent preferences for a particular party—his or ours—and that would not be a fair representation of people's party preferences. That might obtain to a slight extent, but I think the hon. Gentleman would accept that all the evidence so far from psephologists who have studied elections not only in this country, but in other countries that have strongly established party systems, suggests that very few people vote for candidates rather than for the party of their choice—except in the case of tactical voting, which the amendment and the additional member system would remove.

Although valid, unlike most of the Secretary of State's arguments, the hon. Gentleman's suggestion would have a minuscule effect. We return to this question: would that effect be greater or less than what the hon. Gentleman considers to be an academic proposition by us—the prevention of alter ego parties?

The Secretary of State says that, because the major political parties have promised that they will not run alter ego candidates, all is well. He suggests that we should go happily to bed, and not trouble the House further with tedious arguments that keep him from his important business of mismanaging Welsh affairs. It is very likely that he is right. We have yet to hear a final statement from the leader of one of the major political parties, but I gathered from an earlier exchange of nods that we would hear such a statement tonight. Indeed, it may already have been made; I may not have heard it.

Mr. Wigley: The hon. Gentleman cast the same slur in an earlier debate. As he has heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), there is no basis for that slur. There is no reason to expect that we would fiddle the electoral system, any more than the hon. Gentleman's party would.

[Mr. Wigley]

Mr. Letwin: I am delighted to hear that statement, and I fully believe it. The current position is excellent: the major parties have promised not to take such action. However, will that be true in all circumstances and at all times? We are legislating for a constitution and an electoral system, and the Secretary of State's colleagues in the Home Office have admitted that, should such a problem arise at a time when it mattered, it would matter a great deal. It could distort the whole result of an election.

Can such circumstances be imagined? I regret to say this—the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) will probably think me a cad—but I am trying to tell what I believe to be the truth. It is not intended as any sort of slur on his or his party's honour.

If I were the right hon. Gentleman, and if I believed in Welsh independence as sincerely and passionately as I think he does, and if there came a time—not at the next election, but, judging by what has happened in Scotland and the way in which Labour is proceeding, such a time may come—when the right hon. Gentleman's party stood a chance of gaining an overall majority, I might be inclined to use such a tactic just once. I do not say that the right hon. Gentleman would be inclined to use it ever again.

Mr. Wigley: The hon. Gentleman might; we would not.

Mr. Letwin: I am delighted to hear that.

Mr. Ron Davies: Nor would we.

Mr. Letwin: I am delighted at that as well. However, it is not good law—

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman stop digging a hole for himself? He is casting aspersions that are entirely baseless, for which there is not a shred of evidence. I ask him to withdraw them.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. I have considerable respect for him, for his party and for the sincerity with which his party holds its views. The fact is, however, that there could come a time when the balance was so delicate that there was a possibility of achieving a long-held desire. In such circumstances, it makes sense to legislate to stop that possibility.

I concede that, if the amendment gave rise to serious difficulties—if the Secretary of State, unaided by the Liberal Democrats, had been able to produce a serious argument—that remote possibility might not be worth pursuing; but the fact is that the amendment has no serious disadvantages. There are slight disadvantages associated with Independents, and there is a slight possibility of distortion in regard to proportionality, but those are not serious problems. The serious point is that there is a slight risk of a devastating disaster, which ought to be legislated for.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: In spite of the pseudo-cerebral meanderings of the Opposition spokesman in his worst, or perhaps best, Reith lecturer manqué mode, it is clear that the Tories motive for tabling this amendment is based on their fear of finishing fourth in the Welsh Assembly elections. Despite the protestations of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), that is what the amendment is all about.

The Tories know from bitter experience and from all the latest opinion poll evidence that they have not recovered from their below 20 per cent. performance in the election last May. They also know that if the people of Wales are faced with the prospect of voting, not for an individual, but for a party, those who split their votes are more likely to vote for other parties and not for the Conservative party. That is the naked truth, despite the hon. Gentleman's protestations that this is a great constitutional exercise to help to clean up politics in 30 or 40 years' time, because of the possibility of parties subdividing themselves to take advantage of the two-vote system.

Will the Tory party ever get away from the problem that they have with the people of Wales, which causes this dilemma? Their proposition is that a Conservative candidate may get 30 per cent., 40 per cent. or 50 per cent. of the vote, depending on the constituency, but in the second vote the Conservative party will do less well than the individual Conservative candidate. The hon. Gentleman is asking us to believe that he thinks that the Conservative party in Clwyd, North-West is less popular than Rod Richards. That is an extraordinary proposition, but that is the basis of the Conservatives' thought processes.

The Conservative party is still unable to come to terms with the decision made by the people of Wales. There may be split ticket voting: people may vote for a Labour, Liberal Democrat or Plaid Cymru candidate, but will vote for another party with their second vote to have another bite of the cherry. It is human nature that 5 or 10 per cent. of the electorate will think that that is the wise thing to do. Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru and Labour votes may be interchangeable, but they will not leak out to the Conservatives.

Mr. Rogers: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Morgan: I shall give way in a second.

Conservative voters, if they are of the same mind as split ticket voters, will vote for a Conservative Member of the Welsh Assembly but may vote for another party with their second vote. The Conservatives lose on the leaking out, but they do not gain anything on the leaking in, because they refuse to come to terms with devolution. The three parties that are in favour of devolution have the right body language for the Welsh Assembly, but the Conservative party is still playing devolution hokey-cokey: put the right leg in, take the right leg out, put the right leg in and shake it all about.

The Conservatives will not overcome this problem. The votes of the other three parties may be interchangeable for the 5 or 10 per cent. who split their votes, but the Conservative party will not gain because it is not seen as playing the game and is not positive about devolution. If it accepted devolution, it would not lose when people vote for a Member of the Welsh Assembly from one party, but vote for another party on the second vote.

I shall now give way to my hon. Friend, who is an expert on the hokey-cokey.

Mr. Rogers: I would rather leave that to my hon. Friend, who is more skilled in verbosity. He talks about

the interchangeability of votes. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), realised a couple of weeks ago that it is possible that more than 50 per cent. of the people in Wales are against the Welsh Assembly, and, although 50 per cent. of the votes may be interchangeable between the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and Labour, the only Unionist party standing will be the Conservative party. The Labour party must wake up to that fact.

Mr. Morgan: That may be to the Conservative party's advantage, but opinion poll evidence suggests that its position is now worse than it was last May when it got only about 19.5 per cent. of the vote. Its Unionist stance has not done its prospects in the vote next May any good. Everything may change by next May, but the problem is that the Conservative vote in Wales, such as it is, is soft and may leak out on the second vote. Conservatives know that they will not gain from the split ticket voting of voters of the other three parties. That is the motivation behind the absurd position that they are presenting. It is not a fear of parties subdividing, but of finishing fourth in the elections next May.

6.45 pm

Mr. Livsey: The Bill proposes a two-vote additional member system, which was contained in the White Paper. It was clear in the referendum last year that every voter in Wales, especially those who voted yes, understood that. The Liberal Democrats would prefer the use of the single transferable vote system. If the official Opposition were proposing an amendment that included the single transferable vote, we would have a different view of what they are up to.

Dr. Fox: Given the great consistency shown by the hon. Gentleman's party on the single transferable vote issue, why did his party in the House of Lords vote against this proposal when it was considered in the other place?

Mr. Livsey: Our approach was based on realism. It was recognised that we must get the Bill through. The element of proportionality contained in the Bill is a seismic move forward, and the amendment would unstitch that. We accept that the additional member system proposed by the Government is a vast improvement on the first-past-the-post system. It is a more proportional electoral system, and it is one of the features that we support. It will ensure that representation bears more resemblance to the proportions of votes cast, and it will be fairer to all parties. As has been said several times, that is part of the new politics, and we welcome that.

The two-vote additional member system has the advantage of allowing voters to express their preferences for individual candidates in the constituencies and for parties on the lists. That clearly increases voter choice, and allows a vote to be cast for an individual from a different party to the list vote. It allows local, effective candidates to be rewarded above party preferences, with party preferences being re-established in the list vote.

The two-vote system also makes it more likely that an independent candidate can be elected for a region. The Conservative amendments would remove the provision for independent candidates to stand in the regions. That is undemocratic, and the Bill should not exclude the possibility of independent candidates coming forward. In my constituency in 1983, I was opposed by a rural revivalist, Richard Booth, who is a well-known local bookseller in Hay-on-Wye. Does the Conservative party really want to snuff out such individualism and such colour in our political system?

Following the election, we want a review of the electoral system to be used for the Assembly. The Secretary of State agreed to such a review with Alex Carlile, the former Member for Montgomery. Why is there no provision for a review in the Bill? We hope that the spirit in which the Secretary of State came to that agreement with Alex Carlile will live on. The Government conceded in amendment No. 136 that a review of the Assembly's work with regard to sustainable development should be carried out. We should like an assurance from the Secretary of State that the agreement that was struck with Alex Carlile will be honoured. He has given that before, and I am sure he will not find it difficult to give it again.

The Tories say that their amendments will prevent split-ticket voting and stop parties using the additional member system to their advantage. I shall shorten my speech because we have been through all that and I want to make progress. The Minister has made it clear that there was no collusion. I said that we did not subscribe to such a practice and Plaid Cymru also said that, so we can bury that issue.

We would have some sympathy with the spirit of the amendment if the only outcome would be to prevent split-ticket voting. However, it would reduce voter choice, which is crucial, and would remove the ability of independents to stand in the regions as well. The amendments are not the best way to prevent dishonesty, and we do not support them. We supported amendments to the Registration of Political Parties Bill to prevent split-ticket voting, and I hope that another way can be found to prevent it under this legislation.

Lords amendment No. 21 closes a loophole that would allow a person who has left a political party to become an Assembly Member following a vacancy for the party that he or she has left. It will protect parties from the problem of defectors and ensure that voters are represented by a member of the party that they support. We welcome that amendment.

Mr. Syms: In Committee, we had a wide-ranging debate on electoral arrangements. When we raised concerns, we were told that they would be dealt with under the Registration of Political Parties Bill. I was on the Committee that examined that Bill, and some of the issues that were raised then, especially by my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), relating to alter ego parties are not dealt with by that Bill. To some extent, that is why the amendment has been tabled. It would not be necessary if the Registration of Political Parties Bill had closed what may be a loophole.

When the electoral arrangements for a description on the ballot paper were changed in the late 1960s, James Callaghan told the House that the arrangements would not be abused, but, in recent years, people have used descriptions to mislead electors. The Registration of Political Parties Bill rules out that abuse, but, under the additional member system there is potential—I put it

[Mr. Syms]

no higher than that—for abuse by some alter ego parties. We are all honourable people in the Chamber, and I do not think that any party would try to deceive the electors. However, if there is a loophole some party may try to use it. It may do that only once, after which there would be great uproar and perhaps the law would be changed. At this stage, the general concern, certainly among Opposition Members, is to close the loophole now.

A single vote proposal for first-past-the-post seats and a top-up list is not new. The Hansard Society proposed alternatives to our current electoral system in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and came up with a similar proposal. I understand the Secretary of State's point that, in one or two cases, it would cut out independents, but it is a question of balancing rights and wrongs. The deficiencies in the current legislation may outweigh the difficulties of the change in terms of a single vote causing difficulties for one or two independents.

The additional member system has been used in Germany, and there have not been many examples of alter ego parties. In one or two lander elections, particularly in north Germany, some states parties tended to align with one or other of the major parties—the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats—because there was an advantage in picking up list seats. In the early 1950s, the German Refugees party, which was part of the Adenauer coalition, used to garner a substantial number of votes on the list. Of course, it was part of the general centre-right and over the years it was absorbed into the Christian Democrats. That is probably the only example of a party that picked up list seats. The issue is serious and it deserves careful consideration.

In the context of alter ego parties, whether it is an advantage to a party to try to pull a fast one depends a great deal on the predictability of the first-past-the-post results because, under the additional member system, the distribution of additional seats is in proportion to those who do badly or those who do very well in terms of first-past-the-post seats. The one certainty about Welsh politics, certainly in terms of single-member constituencies, is that it is a relatively predictable area of the United Kingdom in that it regularly returns Labour party candidates. I do not think that there are many marginal seats in the Principality. In future, it would be possible for a political party to form a view on how it will fare on first-past-the-post and perhaps arrange matters in a way that might enable it to get some slight additional benefit under the additional member system. That system reduces the likelihood of a party getting an overall majority, partly because of proportionality.

There are 40 first-past-the-post and 20 additional-list seats and perhaps a party—in the context of Wales, it would probably be the Labour party—might be close to an overall majority. In such an event, there would be a tremendous temptation to get an extra seat or two to try to form an administration. All politicians are sometimes tempted, especially when we feel passionately about our cause. The amendment merely tries to fill a gap that the Registration of Political Parties Bill has not filled and to deal with this important issue.

Mr. Öpik: No Conservative Member has described how the Opposition system takes account of the fact that tactical voting will massively skew the proportions and further distort the outcome and make it difficult for proportional representation to work effectively.

Mr. Syms: One of my reasons for being a great supporter of first-past-the-post is that it leaves greater discretion at constituency level with electors. If they wish to vote in a specific way, perhaps not particularly for their first preference but for a Liberal Democrat or a Labour candidate to defeat my party, that is their choice. Inevitably, there will be some variation in seats, but, in 40 constituencies, the swings and roundabouts would mean that the vote would not differ much when all the results were added. In Brecon, the tactical vote may go one way, but the seat next door may go in a completely different way. The totality of the vote would show a close correlation. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's point is material.

Mr. Swayne: At the risk of taxing the patience and good will of the Secretary of State, particularly in this age of new politics and consensus, may I say that he rather overplayed the argument that the amendment addresses a problem that is largely a figment of Conservative imagination? That was certainly not the case in the other place. Lord Falconer of Thoroton said:

"My Lords, the Government have thought carefully about this. They are aware of the problem . . . Plainly, if someone provides a solution that deals with all the problems the Government will certainly think about it. They have given considerable thought to it. We do not have a closed mind,".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 272.]

It is the height of irresponsibility to acknowledge that there is a problem with the legislation and to rely on the Opposition and other parties to address the solution. However, the solution having been addressed, it has been decided to reject it.

The second point that the Secretary of State was determined to labour was the minuscule probability of split-ticket voting, but that is not the perception of their lordships. Lord Bledisloe said:

"My Lords, . . . I think I now see that there is a real problem, certainly mathematically. I am also prepared to accept that it is a problem that is not just mathematical but is real, because from these Benches I am perfectly prepared to believe that any political party will commit any dirty trick which it thinks will be to its own advantage."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*,15 July 1998; Vol. 592, c.269.]

We all accept that no political party in the House today would indulge in that sort of activity. However, the Secretary of State described the pressures that led to tactical voting at the last general election. Does he suddenly believe that this new age of consensus and good will has banished those pressures for ever? Does he believe that future political leaders under those pressures will not institute just such a form of voting to achieve the desired ends? Of course that is possible, so it is right that we should try to deal with the issue now.

The right hon. Gentleman's principal argument against the amendment is that it would undermine the democratic integrity of the voting system. That is nonsense. AMS was introduced to address the overall proportionality of the votes. That will be guaranteed by the amendment.

7 pm

Mr. Ron Davies: We have had an interesting debate and I think that we all understand the issues involved in the Lords amendment. I still believe that what the other place is suggesting is unfair and discriminatory. It does not deal with the problem of alter ego parties, despite the protestations of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). All parties in the House have given undertakings, and we all accept them. None of the existing political parties will become involved in the collusion that has been suggested. I say to the hon. Gentleman that, given Wales and Welsh politics, if that were to happen it would be quickly exposed and immediately reviled by the people of Wales. It would not be successful.

The amendment strikes at the heart of an important part of devolution—the settlement that we have and the new democratic arrangements that we are proposing for the Assembly. It is contrary to the mandate that was given to all politicians from Wales at the general election and contrary to the wishes of the people of Wales as expressed in the referendum. Therefore, I believe that the House should reject the amendment.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 5 to 12, 14 to 16, 18 and 20 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 21 and Government amendment thereto agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 22 disagreed to.

Clause 12

DISQUALIFICATION FROM BEING ASSEMBLY MEMBER

Lords amendment: No. 27, in page 8, line 9, at end insert

(", or

(e) he is a Minister of the Crown.")

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to take amendment (a) in page 28, line 12, at end insert—

'( ) A Minister of the Crown may not—

(a) be elected to be Assembly First Secretary, or

(b) be appointed as an Assembly Secretary.'.

Mr. Hain: I will speak briefly at this stage in the hope of replying more fully to the debate later.

First, let us be clear about the terms of the Lords amendment. The entire argument by the Conservative peers who backed it was whether the Secretary of State for Wales could also be the National Assembly's First Secretary. They were particular about that, to the point of obsession. However, the amendment does not specify that. It does not even specify that the Secretary of State should be barred from being a member of the Assembly Executive; it seeks to determine who should be a Member of the Assembly itself.

I freely acknowledge that quite different constitutional functions will be exercised by the Secretary of State for Wales and the First Secretary of the National Assembly. We have never suggested that they could or should be exercised by the same person in perpetuity. What we have here is a smokescreen of concern, hyped up into a frenzy and disguising a blatantly political exercise to dictate to the people of Wales for whom they may or may not vote.

If the people wish to elect a Minister of the Crown as an Assembly Member, that is their right. Why should this House deny them that right? I urge the House to reject the amendment.

Dr. Fox: The arguments on the issue have been put clearly both here and in the other place, so there seems little point in detaining the House unnecessarily by reiterating them.

This is not just an exercise in political posturing, as the Under-Secretary suggested; it is about a point of principle. To understand what lies behind the Lords amendment and our amendment in lieu we have to look at two matters. First, what is the role of a Member of the Assembly; and secondly, what is the role of a Minister of the Crown?

First, the direct constituency Assembly Members have to do what we understand clearly in this House, which is to look after our constituents' interests as well as scrutinising the wider picture. Secondly, those on the party list will have to look after the general interests, under whatever arrangements they come to within their parties or relating to whatever constituency interest may be pertinent. Thirdly, all Members will have to scrutinise the political life of Wales independently, just as hon. Members are supposed to do in this House.

We have also to consider the role of Ministers of the Crown. The Prime Minister published a ministerial code in July 1997. The first principle set out is:

"Ministers must uphold the principle of collective responsibility."

The second is:

"Ministers have a duty to Parliament to account, and be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their Departments and Next Step Agencies."

The eighth principle is:

"Ministers in the House of Commons must keep separate their role as Minister and constituency Member."

I shall deal with the last principle first. Those of us who have been Ministers know that a great deal of discipline is required to keep ministerial and constituency roles separate. In many Departments, there is potential for the roles to overlap, so Ministers require a great deal of self-discipline to keep them separate. How much more difficult would that be if another role were added—ministerial, constituency and Assembly roles, all at the same time? There are phenomenal dangers in creating potential for conflicting interests.

The part of the code that deals with the

"policies, decisions and actions of their Departments and Next Step Agencies"

creates another difficulty. A Minister of the Crown may sit in a Welsh Assembly and be responsible not only for the scrutiny of, for example, United Kingdom-wide agencies, but for the agencies' actions in Wales. That is utterly preposterous. Upholding collective responsibility is the most difficult responsibility.

The Under-Secretary referred to the First Secretary. What could be more preposterous than having to be First Secretary and a Minister of the Crown at the same time? What is he supposed to do—write to himself,

[Dr. Fox]

"Dear Secretary of State, I find myself in my position of First Secretary in the Assembly needing a bit more money so could you please arrange this for me because I am finding it awfully hard? Yours, the First Secretary." Then he has to write back to himself saying, "Dear First Secretary, Unfortunately, due to my collective responsibility in the Cabinet, my Treasury colleagues tell me that I am not able to discuss this with you. Yours, the Secretary of State."

Perhaps that will be the ultimate job share—or, in the lingo of the Welsh Labour party, the ultimate twinning. However, it seems to those of us who live in the real political world that that is extraordinary politics and will create incompatibility on a scale that we have never known in the House of Commons. It is not a point of party politics; it is a point of principle. The Secretary of State for Scotland has made it clear that he could not stand to be the First Minister in the Scottish Parliament while being Secretary of State for Scotland, because that would be a conflict of interest. If that is true of devolution in Scotland, why is it not true of devolution in Wales? If it is a point of principle for the Secretary of State for Scotland, why is it not one for the Secretary of State for Wales? It does not matter whether one holds the posts for a week or a year; a point of principle is involved.

Mr. Livsey: Surely the hon. Gentleman will agree that the crucial difference between the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly is that the Scottish Parliament has primary legislative powers. It is a totally different situation from that which will obtain in Wales.

Dr. Fox: In the previous debate—about alter ego parties—I wondered whether we were talking about the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party, but I realise now that they are playing their usual welcome-mat role for the Labour party.

We are debating a matter not of degree but of principle—that there would be a conflict of interest, and one cannot serve two masters. If one is to represent someone in one body, one cannot be bound by collective responsibility in another. Such an arrangement—especially given the nature of the Welsh devolution settlement—would be constitutional nonsense. The Government would do well to accept now that it would be nonsense—before they land themselves in the hot water that they will so richly deserve if they do not accept the Lords amendment.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I oppose Lords amendment No. 27, which is based on a narrow-minded personal vindictiveness towards my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State Wales. I therefore support the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendment No. 27.

Inclusivity is a fundamental aim and principle of the Assembly. Inclusivity is essential to ensure that the National Assembly for Wales reflects all the political and cultural traditions in Wales and that it gives fair representation to women; to minority ethnic groups; to north, south, east and west Wales; to Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking areas; and to areas that voted yes in the referendum and to those that voted no.

Another principle was to ensure that experienced and high-calibre candidates stand for the Assembly and that Members of the House of Lords should themselves be free to stand for the Assembly. Although the Lords cannot stand for this House or even vote in parliamentary elections, they will be able to be Members of both the House of Lords and the National Assembly for Wales. I therefore cannot accept the Lords intention of preventing hon. Members and Ministers from standing for or holding office in the Welsh Assembly. There is no constitutional reason why a Minister of the Crown cannot be a Member of the Welsh Assembly.

It would be wrong also to assume that there would be any conflict of interest. Ministers, and Ministers of the Welsh Assembly, will be accountable to both bodies and will be judged on their integrity by their own electorate. As the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) said, there are good reasons why such a dual mandate should be encouraged and given in a transitional period, to ensure continuity and co-ordination in the establishment of the new National Assembly for Wales.

Dr. Fox: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a difference between being an hon. Member and being a Minister of the Crown? One is about independent scrutiny of the Executive whereas the other is about being a member of the Executive.

Mr. Edwards: I say again that individuals' integrity will dictate how they should conduct themselves.

I have read the speech made in the other place by Lord Crickhowell. I think that it was a highly personal and spiteful attack that was not worthy of someone who has been Secretary of State for Wales and involved in public life since that time. I shall make no personal comment on Lord Crickhowell.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: Why not?

Mr. Edwards: If I had more time, I would pay a long, glowing tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales for all that he has done to ensure that the Bill gets through not only the House but—perhaps more important—through the Wales Labour party. However, there is not time to do so.

I take exception to the right of the unelected House of Lords—especially of the dominant hereditary group in the House of Lords, 62 of whom voted in support of Lords amendment No. 27—to seek to overthrow one of the Bill's important principles. It is a serious indictment of our parliamentary system that we allow people to legislate who have inherited the right to do so—because they are the eldest son of someone who already had the right to be in the other place. We do not allow people to inherit the right to practise or implement the law; how can it be justified that anyone should inherit the right to make or amend the law?

If this debate and the fiasco offer one important lesson, it is that we must swiftly end the hereditary principle: abolish the right of hereditary peers to legislate. I hope that Ministers will act on that as soon as possible.

The principle of inclusivity must allow hon. Members to stand for the Welsh Assembly. I therefore ask the House to reject Lords amendment No. 27.

Mr. Öpik: I should like, first, simply to comment on Conservative Members' persistent failure to understand

what is going on—that politics has moved on in Wales. They do not grasp that the politics of conflict and confrontation can quite reasonably and effectively be replaced by something else: the supremacy of good ideas.

7.15 pm

Let us move on to Conservative Members' rather astounding failure to understand the opportunities presented by giving the new politics a chance and by giving the future Secretary of State for Wales—whoever he or she may be—the chance to participate in both this Chamber and the Welsh Assembly. Allowing the Secretary of State briefly to play both roles is a matter not of principle but of judgment and practical considerations.

Allowing a Secretary of State for Wales also to be First Secretary presents three benefits and two concerns. The first benefit is the expertise, experience and continuity that one person might bring to the job. The second benefit is having essentially a directly elected Cabinet member who will have a considerable vested interest in being a real voice for Wales. The third is the loyalty that that individual would most likely have to Wales. The job of First Secretary will be attractive and it is unlikely that someone would want to compromise it by being a party puppet.

I must, in fairness, say that the Conservatives have raised two legitimate concerns.

Mr. Evans: If one person is both First Secretary and Secretary of State for Wales, he or she will—as Secretary of State for Wales, because of Cabinet collective responsibility—have to attend Cabinet meetings. What if the Assembly wants that person as First Secretary to be somewhere else? He or she will either have to accept Cabinet collective responsibility or speak for the people of Wales in the Assembly and be sacked as a Cabinet member. Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that that would be a real problem?

Mr. Öpik: That point was one of the two concerns that I was about to mention, and was raised earlier by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). It is a legitimate concern, although it is not sufficient to overcome the benefits of allowing one person to hold both offices.

I think that—without going too deeply into the Cabinet's functions—it should be possible for one person to represent both Wales's interests internally within the Cabinet and the broader public interest. However, as I said, one of the big jobs for whoever might hold both jobs will be to establish etiquette and precedent by temporarily holding the dual position. Then we shall see if he or she is sacked—perhaps because the pressures are too great.

Dr. Fox: I know that the Liberal Democrats have trouble with the matter—it is almost 100 years since any of them was a Minister—but the first point made in the ministerial code is that Ministers must accept collective responsibility. The code has been established by No. 10 Downing street. It will not be for the Secretary of State for Wales to decide on etiquette. A code has already been established and published by the Prime Minister.

Mr. Öpik: Such a one-dimensional approach to profound constitutional changes saddens me, but perhaps goes some way to highlighting why we sometimes have such a fatuous debate. We must be willing to experiment with new ideas on the assumption that we can make them work. If we cannot make them work, we will have to revisit the ideas and the processes that are failing. However, simply to assume that we must change nothing because of some legitimate concerns and obstacles is to assume that we must always maintain the status quo.

The fact that the Welsh people have voted for the Welsh Assembly and—more to the point—the fact that both the overwhelming majority of hon. Members and all three parties representing constituencies in Wales agree that we want to make the Assembly work should go some way in warning the Conservatives that they are out of kilter with the public mood.

My second concern is the fear of vesting too much power in one person. That is not in itself a problem, but if the individual concerned cannot help behaving in a compromising way, we shall need to review the situation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) said, the difficulty would be exacerbated if the Assembly had primary legislative power.

We should be willing to try having both roles held briefly by one person. In the light of experience, it may even turn out not to be a sustainable process, but we will find out soon enough. In the meantime, we have to cut ourselves some slack, try new processes and not be afraid to make a few mistakes. It is prudent to be honest about those concerns and imprudent to try to reduce every debate to simple political attack that does not serve the interests of the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Swayne: Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that it is not a matter of going back to the drawing board every time? The politics will have moved on and Plaid Cymru Members will use the impetus and dynamics of that to shift matters further and they will not give a fig about new politics and consensus.

Mr. Öpik: I allowed that intervention as I hoped that it would illustrate graphically everything that I have said about the Conservatives. If they want to be taken seriously in Welsh politics, they had better recognise that things have moved on. The proportional representation train has left Cardiff station and, far from being even on the platform, the Tories have not bought a ticket.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I shall be brief. I oppose amendment (a), which is a bit rich coming from the Conservative party. We should extend the franchise for Assembly Members as widely as possible. There is no reason why a Minister of the Crown should not stand and be elected to the Assembly, as the Lords amendment provides. In respect of any dual mandate, the issue is what happens afterwards, but I believe that it is a matter for political parties to sort out and that it should not be enshrined in legislation.

In my view, any dual mandate should be for the shortest possible time. There are strong feelings in the Labour party against any dual mandates. There are two main reasons for that. First, we want people to be elected who are committed to the Assembly and not doing another job with different responsibilities. We told people on their doorsteps during the campaign that membership of the Assembly would be a full-time job requiring total

[Ms Julie Morgan]

commitment, bringing power closer to the people of Wales through people who were totally committed to the Assembly. That is why we want people who are committed to one job and one Assembly.

The second reason people in the Labour party are opposed to a dual mandate is that an awful lot of people want to become Assembly Members and think that it is a bit greedy of anyone standing for the Assembly to contemplate doing two jobs when so many are keen to do one. As there are only 60 seats, we are only grudgingly willing to contemplate a dual mandate for right hon. and hon. Members until the next general election in order to avoid by-elections.

As my hon. Friend the Minister said, it is obvious that, in practical terms, a member of the British Cabinet could not be at the same time a Member of the Welsh Assembly or First Secretary for anything other than the shortest transitional period because of the conflicting loyalties that would arise. The First Secretary would be voted in as leader of the Assembly by Assembly Members or by her or his political party—it is a bottom-up approach. She or he would then represent those people. The Secretary of State for Wales is appointed by the Prime Minister and is bound by Cabinet collective responsibility. There is a clear conflict between the two roles, which could not be combined other than for the shortest possible transitional period.

In bringing devolution to Wales, we are bringing democracy and inclusivity. We want to get away from the centralisation of power—and holding two jobs is just that. I am disappointed that we are to have a Cabinet system. It would be quite wrong for a Minister of the Crown to contemplate a dual mandate for longer than the shortest transitional period.

I oppose the amendment; we do not need legislation on something that could happen, but only for the shortest possible time as I know Labour Members are strongly opposed to it.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) made a telling speech that rubbished everything Ministers have said on the issue. She correctly identified the nature of the conflict of interests, but then told the House that it might be allowed to continue for the shortest possible period. She never sought to explain or justify why even the shortest possible period should be allowed. No period should be allowed because the conflict is clear, manifest and unacceptable.

The Government's problem in putting forward their devolution proposals for Scotland and Wales has been their inability to think through the constitutional implications. Inherent in them is the scope for conflict between the way in which the Welsh Assembly runs its affairs, the way in which the First Secretary or other Secretary of the Welsh Assembly decides to operate, and his responsibilities and loyalties and those of a Minister of the Crown at Westminster. I do not welcome that—it was one reason I did not support devolution in the first place—but, to judge from what the hon. Member for Cardiff, North said, it seems that, for perfectly plain short-term political advantage, there is a refusal to accept the implications of what is being proposed. We cannot have a Minister of the Crown also being an Assembly Member—and certainly not being a First Secretary or other Secretary in that Assembly. There has to be a division and that division should be accepted.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Is my hon. Friend saying that we are dealing with mechanics of government that are not based on a sound constitutional settlement and political theory, and that political theories are being made up on the hoof after the mechanics have been put in place?

Mr. Grieve: I agree entirely. That is quite apparent from our earlier debate about the Official Secrets Act 1989 and its application to the First Secretary and Assembly Secretaries. The matter simply has not been thought through, but at least we can try to do something about it. The first step is to ensure that amendment is accepted, if not in the form proposed by the House of Lords, at least in the more limited form proposed by my hon. Friends.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): First, may I make it clear that I perfectly respect the aspirations of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to stand as a First Secretary and I wish him and the others who are standing well? However, that is not the issue. I regret that there has been an attempt to dismiss the matter with some quite irrelevant comments as it strikes at the heart of the constitutional basis of Cabinet government.

Under Cabinet government, there is Cabinet responsibility and Cabinet accountability. If a Minister cannot accept what the Cabinet decides, he or she must leave the Cabinet. With all respect to my right hon. Friend, how on earth can he give his full loyalty to a separate Assembly that may have different perspectives—although it may have the same political background—on policy, expenditure and so on? How can he give equal loyalty to each or full loyalty to either? When he steps out of No. 10 and is interviewed by the BBC and HTV, how will we know which hat he is wearing? When he disagrees, how will we know whether he is speaking for the Assembly and when he is speaking for the Assembly, how will he preserve Cabinet responsibility and accountability?

There is already a problem in that my right hon. Friend has announced that he is standing because every decision he takes between now and next May could influence the choice of leader. There is already a conflict of interests. If my right hon. Friend had announced that he was going for a commercial job that would depend on the decisions that he made as a Minister, he would have to stand down. That may be something that he has to consider in his own interests if he wants to pursue his other ambition.

It would be bad for Wales if we ended up with what in America would be called a lame duck president. We do not want a lame duck Secretary of State who cannot take unpopular decisions between now and May because they may prejudice his chances. I hope that that danger will be avoided, but it has to be perceived.

There is also the question of appearance. We have just had a referendum on whether there should be an Assembly. We are now giving the appearance of London trying to impose a leader on that Assembly. What a fine start to devolution—the London Cabinet has to have its hands on the helm. That cannot be right. My right hon. Friend should consider that.

My right hon. Friend may argue that this is a question of helping with one or two teething troubles. If he were the First Secretary of the Assembly, the wisdom of Ron would be available to the Assembly regardless of whether he was Secretary of State.

My right hon. Friend is lucky that he is among friends today. In an interview with HTV last week, I was asked whether I thought he was trying to influence the choice of leader unfairly. I had to say that the thought had not crossed my mind, but others are not as generous. I can think of no reason other than personal expediency for supporting the proposed course of action. I urge my right hon. Friend to change track now and make the right decision.

7.30 pm

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) is a good colleague and a neighbouring Member of Parliament. He has fallen into the trap that the Conservatives have laid. I regret that very much.

The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) talked about an ultimate job share. Conservative Members are experts in ultimate job shares. Their Front-Bench Members persist in holding other jobs outside the House. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) indulged in transparently mischievous comments that did not address the issues.

Nobody seriously argues that the same person can be Secretary of State for Wales and Assembly First Secretary in perpetuity. It would be politically unacceptable and constitutionally undesirable. The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) are pertinent on the issue of a long-term dual mandate.

Dr. Fox: Is not that precisely the point? If the situation is constitutionally undesirable, what difference does it make whether it lasts for a month or a year? If the principle is wrong, is not the time scale irrelevant?

Mr. Hain: If the hon. Gentleman had waited a moment, I would have explained the facts of political life to him and he would have realised that there is a difference between permanency and a transitional period. There is a very strong case for a transitional period, particularly at the beginning when the Assembly is bedding down and the order transferring the functions of the Secretary of State has still to be implemented. There is a great deal of sense in having some continuity in the interests of stability and good government.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) talked about potential conflict. If there were conflict, it would have to be resolved. If that conflict could not be resolved, there would have to be a resignation from one post. My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West insults my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State if he imagines that he could ever be a lame duck First Secretary of the National Assembly or Secretary of State—he has demonstrated his abilities over the past year.

The Conservative Lords amendment is not about the Secretary of State,

Mr. Wigley: We almost all reject the Lords amendment because it would not allow any Minister to stand, but does the Under-Secretary understand that many of us would be uneasy about the prospect of any long-term dual mandate? Can he assure us that, to meet the points that have been made from both sides of the House, the Government would be prepared to consider an amendment in another place that would limit any dual mandate to the time necessary for the transitional orders?

Mr. Hain: No, we would not be willing to consider that. The right hon. Gentleman has played a constructive role in the passage of the Bill through both Houses. I caution him against falling into a Conservative trap.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Before my hon. Friend leaves the subject of the track record of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, is not that the point? Let us put on record the reality behind the vindictive and pernicious amendment, which comes from a failed former Secretary of State for Wales and is directed at one who has an excellent track record.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully.

The Conservative Lords amendment is not about the Secretary of State. That is the main issue before us. The amendment puts a blanket ban on any Minister being a Member of—and maybe even standing for—the Assembly. The Conservative Lords have not thought through the consequences of their proposal. It is difficult to imagine, but if the Conservatives won the next general election and a Conservative Assembly Member were elected to the House of Commons, there could be a ban on his being appointed to ministerial office at least until he had resigned from the National Assembly. If the person in question were Rod Richards—I take his name at random—perhaps that would be a good idea and in the interests of the Conservatives. I discovered him loitering with intent on the pavement outside the Welsh Office last week, taking an interest in our affairs. There may be no other Conservative Member elected from Wales. Perhaps that is why the Conservatives are so keen on the issue. Perhaps it is not a Ron amendment, but a Rod amendment to prevent his being put in that position.

Let us consider the issue another way round. Consider a serving Minister who wanted to stand for election to the Assembly in May, but was taking a Bill through the House to Royal Assent in the summer before standing down from a Government post. That person would be prejudiced from standing for the National Assembly. A Minister who was seeing out a British presidency of the European Union to the end of June would not be able to stand for election to the Assembly in May. The Lords have clearly not considered such transitional arrangements, which would be prejudiced by their amendment, which we reject.

Imagine a Conservative or Liberal Democrat First Secretary of the National Assembly who stood for the Commons and was appointed Secretary of State in a new Administration. There might be a new approach to devolution that would require some transitional arrangements. That would be blocked if the amendment were passed. Consider a further transfer of functions in the next century. Perhaps broadcasting might be transferred to the Assembly. A Welsh Minister in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport could usefully be an Assembly Secretary—not in the long term, but on a transitional basis. Others with inside experience of Whitehall as a Transport Minister or an Industry Minister

[Mr. Hain]

would have invaluable experience for the post of Assembly Secretary, taking forward policies with maximum consultation and agreement.

We could consider the situation in reverse. A Welsh Secretary could have a great deal to contribute to a Whitehall ministerial post on a transitional basis. Such cross-fertilisation would be constitutionally and politically useful. Many other unforeseen circumstances could be blocked off if we put a rigid straitjacket in the Bill, as the Tory amendment would. It could be extremely damaging; it could prevent talented people from making a contribution to the good government of both Westminster and Wales.

Why is Wales being made a scapegoat? No such rule is proposed for Scotland, Northern Ireland, the European Parliament or local councils. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) that amendment (a) is just a vehicle for another petty, spiteful attack on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. The Conservatives cannot attack his policies on schools, health, jobs and housing because they are very popular. They cannot attack his historic role in establishing the Assembly because that, too, is popular. Even Tories are falling over themselves to stand for it. The Conservatives cannot cope with a Secretary of State who is popular in Wales for the first time in 19 years.

Dr. Fox: No such amendment has been tabled to the Scotland Bill because the Secretary of State for Scotland has said that no transition period is required and that he will not be standing as Secretary of State and First Minister. Why is that not so for Wales?

Mr. Hain: Since the hon. Gentleman has just taken a new job that he claims to be able to do, he, of all people, should know that the Scottish situation is different from the Welsh situation; that is why. The Bills are different and the powers exercised by the Assembly and the Scottish Parliament are different. He must acknowledge that.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it right for the Minister to mislead the House? No Member of the European Parliament can hold any office in any Parliament or Assembly. That is why the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) could not take the job in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is a point of debate, not a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Hain: The Conservatives are so used to Secretaries of State being unpopular in Wales that they find it difficult to comprehend somebody who holds the office being able to wander around the Royal National Eisteddfod, for example, without a phalanx of bodyguards protecting him, or mingle at the Royal Welsh show with demonstrating farmers who welcome rather than abuse him. The Conservatives cannot cope with a people's Secretary of State.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State not out of sycophancy—I leave that to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith)—but out of admiration for his work. He is choosing willingly to leave a Cabinet post—one of the highest posts in the Government, to which most Members of Parliament aspire only in their dreams. He is giving that up—at some point in the future—and is prepared to take a salary cut and all the reductions in status that his self-removal from the Cabinet will entail in order to help give birth to Wales's new democracy. Unlike Conservative Members—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister must be given a hearing.

7.45 pm

Mr. Hain: Unlike many others whom we can imagine, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is not making any presumptions about his position in the Assembly. He is standing in order to take part in the creation of the new and vibrant democracy in Wales. Instead of being denigrated, he ought to be congratulated on that.

I pay tribute to the way in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State fought many difficult battles—sometimes even in the tortuous labyrinths of the Welsh Labour party, and at other times—coaxing and persuading a hesitant Welsh nation into greater self-confidence and common citizenship. Notwithstanding the sniping of Conservative Members, Lord Crickhowell said of my right hon. Friend on 15 July:

> "I wish the present Secretary of State for Wales well. I admire the way in which he has carried the legislation to this point; it is a considerable achievement."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 370.]

I am sure that, on reflection, even Lord Crickhowell accepts that his authorship of the amendment was misconceived.

Apart from on this matter and a few others, the Lords have shown much greater intelligence and responsibility than the Conservative Opposition in this House, as a reading of the debate shows. After the assurances that I have given, and considering the problems with the amendment that I have identified, I am sure that their lordships will not want to put a road block across the passage of the Bill and that, instead, they will allow Wales's exciting new democracy to grow and flourish on schedule, as we are determined it should.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 27 be made—*[Dr. Fox.]*

The House divided: Ayes 148, Noes 265.

Division No. 344] **[7.44 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Brady, Graham
Amess, David	Brazier, Julian
Arbuthnot, James	Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Browning, Mrs Angela
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Beggs, Roy	Burns, Simon
Bercow, John	Butterfill, John
Beresford, Sir Paul	Cash, William
Blunt, Crispin	Chapman, Sir Sydney
Body, Sir Richard	*(Chipping Barnet)*
Boswell, Tim	Chope, Christopher
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia	*(Rushcliffe)*

Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy

Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to certain of their amendments to the Bill: Mr. Nick Ainger, Mr. Ron Davies, Mr. Stephen Day, Mr. Nigel Evans and Mr. Jon Owen Jones; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Jon Owen Jones.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Northern Ireland Bill

[1st Allotted Day]

Considered in Committee, pursuant to Order [17 July].

[Sir Alan Haselhurst *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

Status of Northern Ireland

7.58 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I beg to move amendment No. 60, in clause 1, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

'(1A) The Secretary of State shall not make an order under paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 without the Assembly giving its consent by a cross-community vote as defined in section 4(5).'.

As hon. Members and those who have been following the debate will be aware, the Bill strikes at the very heart of the Union. The Union rests on the sovereignty of this Parliament. When the Government of Ireland Act 1920 came into effect and the southern and northern parts each got a Parliament, a declaration was made in the Act that this Parliament was sovereign and controlled the jurisdiction of all of Ireland at that time. When the south of Ireland changed, having violated the treaty that it entered into, and became, first, the Irish Free State and then the Irish Republic, amendments were made to the Act. However, the Government of Ireland Act continued to declare the authority of this House as supreme and sovereign over Northern Ireland. That is done away with in clause 2, which repeals the Act.

Clause 2 states:

"this Act shall have effect notwithstanding any other previous enactment."

That goes back to the 1800 Act of Union and before that. I should be delighted if the Minister stood up and gave the lie to Bertie Ahern's statement in the Dail, when he said that the British were now out of the equation because they had been content to do away with the 1920 Act and would introduce a Bill—this Bill—that would make all the other Acts subservient to it. An axe has been taken to the root of the Union. No amount of argument can take away that fact, which is on the face of the Bill.

All that stands between us and a united Ireland is not legislation in this House but a vote in a poll that will take place when the Secretary of State decides. No elected person in Northern Ireland will have any say about that. The Secretary of State can say, on a whim, "I shall have a poll, which will be a one-way street. You can vote either to become part of a united Ireland or to remain within the United Kingdom." No other option will be given.

There must be a safeguard, which is why my hon. Friends and I have tabled the amendment. We have heard the Minister of State praising the Assembly. He has been saying how great it is that the Bill will give responsibility to the elected people of Northern Ireland and that there is a democratic deficit that the Government are tackling. Why not therefore trust the Assembly on the great issue of the Union? Why should not the Assembly have the opportunity not only to advise the Secretary of State on that issue but to do so on the same basis—the consensus principle—that has been devised to make a majority a minority in the Assembly and a minority a majority?

As the Minister knows well, the votes in the Assembly must be a majority of the Unionist-registered Members and a majority of the nationalist-registered Members. Now, all that will be needed to change everything that the Bill is setting up and everything else in Northern Ireland is a simple majority of one. If there is a majority of one in the referendum, Northern Ireland will immediately go down the line to a united Ireland. We do not know what preservation there will be for the Unionists in Northern Ireland. There are no safeguards or recommendations. We shall simply have a united Ireland.

We are arguing that a safeguard should exist for the people of Northern Ireland. The nationalists will be represented. The second Minister, or as the Bill tells us, the nationalist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon)—will be in the Assembly. He makes many recommendations. He will give us a new House of Lords—all the members of the new civic forum will be picked by two men. That is better than the House of Lords, as at least there will be even odds about who will be a member. All that will be in the charge of two men. On that issue, not even the First Minister, the Prime Minister of the Unionists, or the second Minister, the Prime Minister of the nationalists, will have any say.

This Committee should say tonight, "We think that the Assembly should be consulted on such a vital issue. If consensus, or the basis of consensus, cannot be reached in that Assembly, how can there be majority support in the country?"

There may be repetition of such referendums, but even the first time that such a vote takes place—I know that there is a condition that another cannot take place for 10 years—it will have a destabilising effect on the whole Province. The Province will suddenly be plunged into a referendum after all the commotion that we have had on this Bill. The Committee should be wise and say, "Yes, the Assembly should have the opportunity to vote on a referendum and, if the vote is in favour, then by all means that referendum should be held."

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I support the amendment moved by my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley). It deals with the issue that is most critical and central to politics in Northern Ireland—whether Northern Ireland is to remain part of the United Kingdom or whether it is to become part of a united Ireland.

My hon. Friend has already said that there is a limitation on the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland—they can move only in one direction. They cannot, for example, choose a form of dominion status, which is the kind of constitutional future that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) once advocated. I still have the documentation on that. Other options for an independent Ulster could still be open to the people of Northern Ireland, but not under the Bill.

Under the Bill, the people of Northern Ireland are allowed only to go into a united Ireland or remain in the United Kingdom. They can remain in the United Kingdom not like other citizens, but in a transitional form as they move gently out of the United Kingdom and into a united Ireland ascribed for them in clause 1. Only one option is offered to them in the clause because the whole purpose of the Bill is to lead towards that very option. The Bill's purpose is to take the people of Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom and into a united Ireland. The provision of clause 1 is to make that come about at the appropriate time. Nowhere in the Bill does it state how the Secretary of State is to determine when the moment has come to call a poll for that purpose.

The Secretary of State will be able to look at the election results and say, fairly clearly, how many Unionists there are and what votes Unionists and nationalists have. Therefore, we have to take ourselves forward to that moment in time when the Secretary of State tots up the votes for Unionists and the votes for nationalists and discovers that half a dozen more nationalists have voted than Unionists. No doubt, at that moment in time, the pressure will come from nationalists for the Secretary of State to call a poll under what will then be the Act. If the Secretary of State were to give in to that pressure, he would end up with a narrow result one way or the other.

Does anyone really believe that, if the Secretary of State is required by the Bill, on the basis of a handful of votes of a majority, to put Northern Ireland into a united Ireland, that will provide a peaceful future for the people of Northern Ireland? It is a preposterous thought, but it is what the Bill requires the Secretary of State to do at that moment in time.

The amendment puts a more sensible proposal before the Committee. It acknowledges that, on every other issue, the Government recognise in the Bill that there is a division in Northern Ireland that requires more than a simple majority for decisions to be taken. Why should the majority outlined in the Bill to take Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom be a majority of a simple variety? If it is right within the Assembly to have a consensus vote on some planning, health or agricultural matter, why is it not required for the crucial issue of the future of the Union itself? If the amendment were accepted, we would have reached the stage where a significant majority had supported the concept of a united Ireland, so we could move towards that knowing that there would not be the deep divisions that would otherwise occur.

Clearly, the statistics are such that it may never occur. This is my 20th year in the House and, in each of those years, I have been told that a united Ireland is just around the corner. If it is simply to be left to the arithmetic in Northern Ireland, it is no closer today than it was 20 years ago.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Presumably, the hon. Gentleman refers to those on the Government Benches when he says that he has been told that a united Ireland is just around the corner. I wonder who put forward that view. I have always taken the view that, if there is to be a united Ireland, it will be long in the future. I have never for one moment believed that there would be a majority in Northern Ireland in the foreseeable future for the kind of state to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I am surprised. Can the hon. Gentleman name any Labour Member who has said otherwise?

Mr. Robinson: I shall answer that question, Mr. Haselhurst, in so far as you will allow me to go outside the terms of the amendment. The reality is that the Government's policy is based on the premise of the

[Mr. Robinson]

inevitability of a united Ireland. They would not follow the policy that they have at present if they did not believe that that was the direction in which the Province was heading. I do not simply blame the Labour Government for that. They were not the first ones to push down that road. That was the policy being pursued by their predecessors in government.

The principle behind the amendment is that it should take more than a simple majority for Northern Ireland to be put out of the United Kingdom, and for a poll which can be divisive in itself, to be held, there clearly is an advantage in having a weighted majority—if one can put it that way—within the Assembly suggesting to the Secretary of State that it is now time for her, or for him as the case may be, to call a vote.

The amendment should commend itself to the Committee, particularly as there are those, like the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), who feel that a united Ireland is not something which will happen quickly and that one should take a moderate line on the position. Here is the opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to support us by voting for the amendment.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Without entering into a debate on the merits of the amendment, will the hon. Gentleman explain why the amendment contains a reference to a cross-community vote as defined in clause 4(5), when that clearly can be defined only by reference to the designation of nationalists or Unionists in terms of the Assembly and when the vote that is envisaged in clause 1 would be a vote by the voters of Northern Ireland who would not all be members of the Assembly nor designated?

Mr. Robinson: The amendment says that a motion in the Assembly would have to be passed by a cross-community vote under clause 4(5) to advise the Secretary of State that the appropriate time had come for her to call the poll of the people of Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman will see another amendment in my name which recommends, much on the basis of the Scottish and Welsh referendums in the past, that a majority of the electorate is required, as opposed to a simple majority, when the referendum is held.

8.15 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): The hon. Members for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) and for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) say that they cannot see a majority favouring a united Ireland. Nevertheless, they still want belt and braces to protect their position. That is slightly illogical. They advocate a dictatorship by a minority. Under the amendment, an overwhelming majority of at least 60 per cent. for a united Ireland would be blocked if a majority in one of the cross-community bodies did not want to be part of a united Ireland. That is the purpose of the amendment and that is completely undemocratic.

There is a great deal of difference between the nature of the Assembly and the nature of the decisions that the Assembly will be taking on a cross-community basis and those affecting the future of the Union. If such an amendment were agreed, it would be dangerous because it would result in a dictatorship by a minority within the community as a whole. The hon. Gentlemen might be happy to think in such terms, but that is what they would achieve.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): The hon. Gentleman is right, but does he accept that almost every decision in the Assembly will be taken under such a system and, therefore, the whole Assembly is undemocratic?

Mr. McNamara: No, I do not accept that because we are talking about a devolved government with a special set of arrangements. The amendment affects the status of Northern Ireland. The Bill provides that, when a majority of the people in Northern Ireland seek the change, it should take place. The amendment suggests that a minority can prevent the wishes of 60 or 70 per cent. of the population being carried forwards.

Yes, that does go to the question of the Union, but the agreement and the legislation have established that the strength of the Union depends not upon the opinions eventually of hon. Members, or indeed of this island, but upon the strength of the opinions of the people in Northern Ireland, whose wishes have been accepted by the people in the Republic of Ireland. Under the agreement, the Union is maintained not by our wishes, but by the wishes of the people of the Republic of Ireland. That is the truth of the agreement. If the hon. Member for North Antrim and his hon. Friends want to maintain such support as they have in Ireland, and if they want to maintain the Union, they must be straight and not fiddle the system, which is what the amendment would do.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): The Committee should address some of the fundamental principles of democracy, as they are inherent in the application of the amendment, which I support. It has been suggested—I think that it is accepted in principle—that democracy means majority rule, but not unbridled majority rule. Principles for the protection of minorities are encapsulated in all modern constitutions, particularly written constitutions.

It has been decided that, in Northern Ireland—this is the essence of the agreement and the Assembly that it sets up—there can be no majority decision making or majority democracy, even with built-in protections; there must be equality of treatment. That is why we have a First Minister and Deputy First Minister, who are elected jointly and who will fall jointly; it is why every important decision requires consensus in both communities, even though, numerically and electorally, one of the communities is significantly smaller than the other. An accommodation based on consensus has been accepted as the price that has to be paid for agreement.

On the most fundamental issue of all—whether Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom or departs into a united Ireland—the ordinary principles of democracy and majority decision making are imposed. In other words, we may not have a majority decision about anything Unionist, but a final and unalterable decision that may be made at any time by a nationalist majority—to abandon for all time the British link and the Union and become part of a united Ireland—may be decided on a single vote. That is a dramatic reversal.

As the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) pointed out, a simple majority of one vote on a border poll that is called as and when the Secretary of State wants is enough to transform Northern Ireland, removing it from the United Kingdom and making it part of a united Ireland. The Bill may indeed advocate that, but the reality is that such a course of action would be a recipe for absolute disaster. As the date for the vote approached, the whole population would be on their starting blocks, ready to take whatever action—perhaps violent—that they thought necessary.

The amendment would not give the Secretary of State such unbridled power. It would allow her to test, through the elected Assembly, whether there was a real consensus for a border poll to be called. It conforms to the consensus principle that many people are prepared to accept and which applies to every other issue. If such a consensus could be obtained in the Assembly, it is likely that the border poll would be carried by a majority that was large enough to have what could be described as political efficacy.

Mr. McNamara: As I understand the hon. and learned Gentleman's position, he is against the Bill and against the agreement. However, under legislation that applied before the agreement, border polls could be carried by a majority of one. If he votes for the amendment, he will be voting for principles that are contained in existing legislation and in clause 1—there would be no alteration of the status quo.

Mr. McCartney: I am dealing with the amendment and the current position. I had nothing to do with the constitutional legislation that provided for the 1972 border poll, but if it had been decided then, by one vote or a tiny majority, that Northern Ireland should remain in the United Kingdom, that would have been as unworkable as the current proposals. The fact that the principle was bad in the past is no justification for continuing with it, as it is equally unworkable now.

Mr. McNamara: The hon. and learned Gentleman did not argue that then.

Mr. McCartney: The suggestion is that I never argued that. I was never called on to argue it; I am simply stating what my view is here and now. If one really wants the principle of consensus to work, one should test it in the Assembly; if there is no consensus among the elected members—on the basis of clause 4(5)—it is unlikely that there will be a majority in the country large enough to have any political efficacy.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): If such a poll was carried out, and delivered the verdict that the majority of the people of Northern Ireland wanted to stay in the United Kingdom, what would the hon. and learned Gentleman say to the majority of the designated nationalists who said that they disagreed? I imagine that he would tell them to get lost, and would he not be right to do so?

Mr. McCartney: With respect, exactly the same principles would apply. The amendment would require, on the same fundamental principles that are contained in the Bill, a nationalist consensus. If nationalists said that a border poll should not be called, the poll would not be called.

The amendment would work both ways; as elsewhere in the Bill, it would require a consensus on both sides. It would prevent the Secretary of State from making the silly, politically ineffective and dangerous decision of calling a border poll in which there was likely to be a majority of 1 or 2 per cent. either way, which would be unworkable. Northern Ireland is not Wales. Something that may work in Wales on the basis of a fractional majority above 50 per cent. of those voting would certainly not work in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney). He may take it as good news that I do not believe that there will be a referendum on the subject for many years to come, if ever. When he talks about the fundamental principles of democracy and majorities and minorities, I respectfully remind him—I do not say this malignly—that one of the main historical arguments, as he knows better than I do, concerns who is the majority and who is the minority. That is why we have to do the best we can in establishing special arrangements for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The hon. and learned Gentleman does not address another aspect of fundamental democracy—the Union that he wants to hang on to, that he will hang on to and that we want him to hang on to. That is democracy at the level of the United Kingdom, which is about responsibility to the House of Commons. The amendment focuses on Northern Ireland, but the clause deals with the United Kingdom—it deals with the Secretary of State, the House of Commons and Parliament.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that both the previous Prime Minister and the current one emphasised that it is for the people of Northern Ireland to make the decision? That is the basis on which I support the amendment.

8.30 pm

Mr. Temple-Morris: That is precisely what it is about. If the Secretary of State, who is answerable to this House, decides that there should be such a referendum—I do not think that I shall see that day—it will be answerable to this House, and it will be a referendum of the people of Northern Ireland.

My next point deals directly with the comments by the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson). There is great repetition of the claim, and some great belief, that the whole purpose of the legislation is to deliver a united Ireland. There seems to be an underlying fear that everyone south of the border is itching to have the hon. and learned Member for North Down in the Dail rather than here.

I assure the hon and learned Gentleman that there is, in fact, a considerable feeling of relief that he is our responsibility, not theirs. All they want is to deliver peace to their island, which is also the island of the hon. and learned Gentleman. The legislation is not about delivering a united Ireland, but about delivering peace to the island of Ireland. I ask the hon. and learned Gentleman and others to try to see it from that perspective, because nobody, but nobody, is going to take Northern Ireland away from them.

[Mr. Temple-Morris]

We are told that, the moment there is a population change in favour of the nationalists, there will immediately be enormous pressure on Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join a united Republic of Ireland. That would be most unwise, and I greatly doubt whether, if there was some minor population change, which would take years to happen in any case, the nationalist community in Northern Ireland would risk reopening the sort of conflict which, by that time, would have been over for many years.

The clause is a good one. The matter is one for the United Kingdom Government of the day to deal with. As a United Kingdom matter, it will be dealt with by the Secretary of State. If we ever get to that stage, although I do not see us reaching it, the Assembly will clearly have a vested interest, because the matter will have left its Members to come up to the level of this place; but it must be dealt with by this House, and by the Government answerable to it.

Mr. Thompson: The amendment deals with one of the fundamental issues about which we as Unionists are greatly concerned. We believe that there are a terrible lot of people who want to put Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) seemed to be saying that that is not true, but perhaps he should speak to his hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) and see whether he believes that. I think that the hon. Member for South Down is keen to see a united Ireland; certainly, over the years, he has done his best politically to get a united Ireland.

The idea that nobody wants a united Ireland is nonsense. The reality is that there is a movement to put Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom. Those of us who oppose the agreement are persuaded that the rationale behind the agreement is to get rid of us—perhaps not overnight, but gradually, over time, to try to persuade the people of Northern Ireland to join the people of the Republic of Ireland.

As I understand the current arrangements, there could be a border poll, to be decided by a simple majority; but that poll would not be a determinant or definite poll. In other words, the result would have to come here to the House of Commons—to this sovereign Parliament—and it would be for this Parliament to decide what to do about that poll. Clearly, if a majority of the people, or even of the electorate of Northern Ireland, voted to leave the United Kingdom, it would still be for this Parliament to decide what should happen. In other words, the poll would not be a definite decision.

However, under the Bill, when the poll is called the Secretary of State will be under an obligation to carry out the wishes expressed in that poll. That appears to me to be a significant constitutional change, and a weakening of the constitution governing Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that we need an amendment to clarify that position.

We have heard a lot of talk about referendums. Referendums are dangerous things, and a democracy cannot operate under referendums. The question that is asked and the propaganda that is promoted can often influence the result, as we saw during the recent referendum in Northern Ireland. We live in a parliamentary democracy, so it is up to Parliament, or other democratically elected institutions, to decide issues. We should not have issues decided by referendum.

I believe that to have the Assembly vote on the issue would give a far more representative result than a referendum. That the Secretary of State should exercise the option given in the amendment and put such questions to the Assembly is but an instance of democracy. Therefore, I believe that the Committee should support the amendment.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): We have heard from the supporters of the amendment a novel set of presentations, convoluted in their interpretation of democracy and of figures. It is the first time that I have heard the Unionist family, if I may call them that, indicate that 51 per cent. in support of the Union is not acceptable to them. That assertion has come from several hon. Members who have already clearly indicated that 71 per cent. of a referendum vote by the people of Northern Ireland is not acceptable by turning their faces against that verdict of the people of Northern Ireland and against the implementation of the Belfast agreement. That belies the integrity of the argument about the numbers game. If the time came, and we were foolish enough to accept this amendment, the argument regarding 51 per cent. would be offered for 61 per cent.

The, I hope, devolved Northern Ireland Assembly will deal with subjects that are transferred from this place. Reserve powers will be retained by the Secretary of State and, through her, this place will maintain sovereignty. In that context, there is a great differential between those two concepts. As we are talking about mathematics, we should recognise that cross-community or parallel consensus requires a majority of Unionists and a majority of nationalists, and others, who constitute the whole. A majority of the parts is obviously a majority of the whole, which comprises those parts. The mathematics of the matter erode the substance of the argument advanced by the last few speakers.

I return to the basics. The acceptance of the will of the people of Northern Ireland by Unionists on any matter is always subject to party politics. The will and the wish of the people is seldom the end product that is addressed. That is illustrated clearly by the fact that the anti-agreement Unionist family have rejected totally the 71 per cent. figure—they argue that it was the result of a propaganda machine, deceit, misrepresentation and so on. I have witnessed politics in Northern Ireland for the past several decades, and political life is driven by propaganda. So what is new now? If Unionist Members are insinuating that the people of Northern Ireland are stupid and do not know what they voted for, it is a deep insult to them.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that, if a simple majority of 51 per cent. of the people of Northern Ireland voted to move into a united Ireland, that would make for social or political peace in Northern Ireland? Is that his argument?

Mr. McGrady: No, it is not. A result of 51 per cent. would indicate what it indicates: 51 per cent. of the people of Northern Ireland—the majority—would like to be associated with the rest of Ireland. The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) implied that there was

something wrong with people aspiring to a united Ireland achieved through peaceful and democratic means. I see nothing wrong with that. I have lived with that idea and worked towards it all my life through purely democratic, argumentative and persuasive means, Hon. Members may rest assured that I shall continue to do so—even to the point of trying to persuade the hon. Gentleman that that is the most advantageous way for Ireland to advance politically, socially and economically. My party puts on record its opposition to the amendment before the Committee this evening.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): This has been a most interesting debate at the beginning of the Committee's consideration of the Bill. I do not intend to stray into the next batch of amendments, which deal with the question of a majority, but we cannot treat this amendment or those that accompany it in a vacuum.

On Second Reading, my right hon. Friend and many other right hon. and hon. Members said that the Bill is based upon the agreement for which a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted. The hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) was correct to refer to democracy. However, we must have at the back of our minds what constitutes democracy when it comes to these matters. In this case, democracy means that the majority of the people of Northern Ireland voted for the agreement. Clause 1, which we are considering and which the hon. and learned Gentleman and his colleagues wish to amend, is part of the agreement—word for word. I refer the hon. and learned Gentleman to page 3 of the agreement, the top two paragraphs of which are reproduced in subsections (1) and (2) of clause 1. Given that the House of Commons is enacting the agreement, it would not be right for it to change it as suggested.

I do not say that the arguments that have been put forward do not have merit in their own right, but that is overridden by the fact that the political parties in Northern Ireland, and, above all, the people of Northern Ireland, signified their assent to those paragraphs, which are now in the Bill.

8.45 pm

Mr. Robert McCartney: The Minister implies that the terms of the agreement were put before the people of Northern Ireland and asserts that the arguments being advanced today are valid in their own right. When the Government sought the people's endorsement, did they put those valid arguments to them?

Mr. Murphy: I said that, for debating purposes, the arguments are valid—of course they are. However, they are consistent with neither the Bill, the agreement nor the spirit of the agreement. The spirit of the agreement is that the Secretary of State should, when she or he thinks fit—this is reproduced in schedule 1—hold a border poll. The gap between the border polls would be no less than seven years. However, no Secretary of State would hold such a poll unless he or she thought that the majority of people in Northern Ireland wanted a change to be effected. The Secretary of State would then have to come to this House and put that point.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Where in the Bill is the Secretary of State required to come to this House to ask it to hold a border poll? It requires that she ask the House to give effect to what happens as a result of a border poll. The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) said that the Secretary of State came to this House because she had to. She does not have to; she does so of her own volition.

Mr. Murphy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I am saying that the result of the poll is then relayed to the House, as it was in the case of the referendums for Wales and for Scotland.

The underlying issue is that of consent. The purpose of discussing whether this provision will take us down the road to a United Ireland is overridden by the fact that the spirit of the agreement and the Bill is based squarely on the consent of the majority of people who live in Northern Ireland. There is nothing more and nothing less than that in it.

Mr. Winnick: Over the past quarter of a century or more, especially when the United States has attempted to give the impression that we are using Northern Ireland as a colony, we have argued that we are respecting the wishes of the majority in Northern Ireland. Would not the amendment undermine the essence of that argument?

Mr. Murphy: Indeed. We accept that argument in other contexts, too. I do not want an independent Wales or an independent Scotland, but I would accept the wish of the majority of those people if they voted accordingly.

The Bill is clear: the Secretary of State may hold a poll at any time, and she must hold a poll if she thinks that a majority would be likely to vote in favour of a united Ireland. She would hold such a poll only if she thought precisely that, and it would have to be based on a proper assessment of the political circumstances at the time.

Mr. Peter Robinson: The kernel of the Minister's argument is that the agreement has been given the support of the people of Northern Ireland and it must therefore be given legislative effect in its entirety. Yet the notes on clauses say that there are clauses in the Bill that have no relevance to the agreement, because the agreement was silent on many of the issues contained in the Bill. The agreement does not say that the mechanism for putting it into effect cannot be what the amendment proposes. The amendment is not inconsistent with the agreement; it is simply a mechanism that will be brought into play.

Mr. Murphy: The agreement is clear, not only in terms of the clauses that the hon. Gentleman wants to amend, but in respect of schedule 1 to the Bill, which is schedule 1 to the agreement. It states:

"The Secretary of State may by order direct the holding of a poll".

It is quite right that the ability to hold such a poll should be in the hands of the Secretary of State, who is the Government's chief representative in Northern Ireland, but the essence of the argument is that the agreement tells us that that should be the case. The parties that met in Belfast said that that should be the case, and the people agreed it. Of course parts of the Bill clarify the agreement, but there is no need to clarify this part: it is crystal clear that the Secretary of State is the person who should have the ability to hold such a poll, and that it should be held on the basis of the consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland who vote in it.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My hon. Friend mentioned the principle of consent.

[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

Despite what has been said from across the way, the Bill is entirely compatible with the objectives of the Welsh and the Scottish legislation.

Mr. Murphy: I understand that. The Bill is based on what the Government are doing throughout the United Kingdom, whether in London, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland—we are holding referendums to ask the people what they think.

Mr. Thompson: What would happen if 51 per cent. of those who voted in a referendum voted to go into a united Ireland, and a majority in the Assembly had voted to stay within the United Kingdom? What would the Government do then?

Mr. Murphy: There would be a big disagreement, but there is no doubt that the will of the people must prevail.

Mr. Thompson: Does that mean that the view of an elected Assembly in Northern Ireland in which a majority wanted to stay in the United Kingdom would be rejected, and the view expressed in a referendum would not?

Mr. Murphy: We are getting into awful hypothetical situations. We will discuss the percentage when we come to the next group of amendments. The chief reason why the Government cannot accept the amendment is because it goes against the agreement. As a consequence of that, I ask hon. Members to reject them.

Rev. Ian Paisley: What I want to say to the Minister is simple: nothing in the agreement forbids him to accept the amendment. It substantiates the fact that the Secretary of State will have the right to hold a poll, but it also provides that she should consult the Assembly. Surely that does not go against the spirit of the agreement.

I am glad that the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) has been converted to majority rule—it has come as a tremendous revelation on this vital issue. Labour Members should look to the history of their party. Where did this all come from? It came from Mr. Herbert Morrison and from a distinguished Labour Prime Minister, Mr. Clement Attlee, who took on the Dublin Government, because he was not a bit afraid of them. He decided that the Parliament of Northern Ireland would decide on remaining within the Union.

When the Parliament of Northern Ireland was prorogued, I moved in the House that the issue should come back to the people and should be decided by the majority. Other amendments deal with who are the majority of the people. I remind Labour Members that I sat in the House through intense debates about devolution for Scotland. I remember their saying that they would not accept a majority vote at all, and that a majority of the people of Scotland must vote for devolution. If that was good enough for Scotland on devolution—not on going out of the United Kingdom—surely it is good enough for us to say what we are saying without being hammered down as if we are bigots of some sort.

We must consider this realistically. The Minister referred to Wales and Scotland voting in a referendum on independence. Is he telling me that he would stand at the Dispatch Box and say to the Scottish people that Scotland would have to leave the United Kingdom immediately if one person provided a majority? Would he come to the House and recommend, as a Minister, that Scotland should get out of the United Kingdom? Would he do the same for his own country? Certainly not—and he knows that. We are presenting an argument that we have a right to present.

Then there is the question of voting in the Assembly. I have heard a good deal about people rejecting the referendum. People rejected the Tory party; does that mean that, having been rejected by the people, the Tory party should not continue to be represented in the House of Commons? The Labour party has been rejected at times; does that mean that the Tories should take its place? We are all democrats. We come back, and we fight in defence of our principles. It is suggested that the line should be "You need not bother to fight, because the people have decided the issue once and for all, and it can never be changed." But politics is about change, and the House should be prepared to listen to people who are democrats.

I could say many things about the referendum. I will say that I do not think it right for a Prime Minister to make promises to the people, and to tell them that those promises will be included in legislation—and I cannot find those promises anywhere in the Bill. I do not think it right to say, in such circumstances, that the result of the referendum should stand.

The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) says that there may never be a referendum. In that case, why is he voting for one tonight? I asked the former Prime Minister—in the presence of the two other party leaders, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) and the then right hon. Member for Lagan Valley—to give us a border poll. Such polls were to take place over 10 years; in fact, we had only one. The then Prime Minister said no. When I asked why not, he said, "We know the result, so it is not necessary." When I asked the same question of the present Prime Minister, he said the same. I said, "Why not take the matter to the people? After the people had spoken, you could put the matter aside and get on with the nitty-gritty of politics in Northern Ireland." The Prime Minister said no.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one reason why no one is willing to organise a border poll nowadays is the fact that the question in the schedule in the earlier border poll was so clear and unambiguous that it was not possible for the Government to mislead people by any amount of propaganda? It was a case of a simple yes or no. Is that not why every Government has avoided asking the question ever since?

Rev. Ian Paisley: I agree. The Prime Minister said that there would be no more border polls on that basis. This is a new border poll, and we do not even know what question will be asked. The original question was

"Do you want Northern Ireland to be joined with the Republic of Ireland, outside the United Kingdom?"

The issue is simple. Does the Secretary of State make up her own mind, without consulting the House, about the terms involved in a border poll? None of us knows what question will be asked at this point. People are bragging

about the Assembly, saying how important it is and what important people have been elected. Do hon. Members not wonder why 71 per cent. voted for a referendum, and why, although the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has 28 votes in the House, those who oppose what he stands for also have 28? Where did that 71 per cent. go to? According to that, some of us should have been here with half a dozen members.

The House should take a fair view. I welcome the fact that the Minister has already admitted that the Secretary of State need not come to the House until a border poll has taken place.

All my life, I have read that the number of Roman Catholic people is increasing, and that we will be voted out. When I was a boy of 10, I was told that when I was 25 there would be a united Ireland. The other day, the *Belfast Telegraph* had a huge article, which said that 30 years after the millennium we will be part of the Irish Republic.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman is going beyond his amendment, and he is bringing in matters that have nothing to do with the amendment.

9 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley: What is the use of having an amendment when the facts fly in the face of the evidence? I shall leave the matter there. This has been a useful debate, and I was interested in some of the comments made. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Down. After being convicted of his sins of the past, he now believes in a majority vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 10, Noes 285.

Division No. 345] **[9 pm**

AYES

Beggs, Roy
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Forsythe, Clifford
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Wilkinson, John

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rev. Ian Paisley and
Mr. William Thompson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin

Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dan *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I beg to move amendment No. 104, in clause 1, page 1, line 11, after 'But', insert

'subject to subsection (3) below'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 106, in page 1, line 15, at end add—

'(3) For the purposes of subsection (2) above, "majority" means a majority of 60 per cent. of those voting in such a poll.'.

Mr. Trimble: The issues touched on in amendments Nos. 104 and 106 are similar to those raised in the previous debate, so I shall try to be as brief as possible. Too much time has already been taken.

The point has been made, and I want to underline it, that there is a contradiction between the terms of the agreement, which at so many points put an emphasis on consensus—in particular, building into the operation of the new institutions in Northern Ireland the weighted majorities and consent within both the nationalists and the Unionists—and a simple majority provision for a border poll on more important issues. It is right to draw attention to those matters.

As was said in the previous debate, that has been the position for some time. The concept of a border poll has existed since 1972, and prior to that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland rested on the consent of the elected representatives. As was pointed out, that extended back to the Ireland Act 1949. Indeed, it goes back to the 1922 Irish Free State (Agreement) Act. To that extent, the Act of Union (Ireland) was modified in 1922, and since then we have been living with the possibility of fundamental constitutional change if the people of Northern Ireland, either through their elected representatives or in a poll, should so desire.

While it has been the position since 1972-73 that the status could change if there were a vote, the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) made the apt point that up until now all those border polls have been non-binding. Indeed, until now, all the referendums that have been held in the United Kingdom have not been binding.

Clause 1(2) will introduce an obligation on the Secretary of State to make proposals to Parliament to give effect to the results of a referendum. As the clause will place an obligation on the Secretary of State, and therefore make the referendum binding, I thought that it would be appropriate to examine the matter more [illegible].

There is another reason for focusing [illegible] clause 1(2). On my reading of clause 1 and of schedule 1, polls held for the purpose of schedule 1 clearly would not be confined—as some Committee members have suggested—to the question whether Northern Ireland should be transferred to the Republic of Ireland. It is quite clear that—provided that the issue of leaving the United Kingdom is raised—any number of questions could be asked in a poll. Schedule 1 is quite clear on that point. An obligation would be placed on the Secretary of State only when the question arises of going into an all-Ireland state. I therefore thought that it would be appropriate to examine more closely the matter of "a majority".

9.15 pm

In the Assembly's operation, under the concept of cross-community support, we will use a weighted majority of 60 per cent. It is therefore appropriate also to raise the issue of such a majority in a poll. The effect of the amendments is such that only if there is a majority of 60 per cent. in favour of going into an all-Ireland state would there be an obligation on the Secretary of State to introduce proposals. If there were a majority of between 50 and 60 per cent., deciding what to do would be a matter of judgment and of the Government's and the Secretary of State's discretion. They might still wish to give effect to it; they might not.

The provision deals only with the matter of being under an obligation to come to the House and to effect the terms of border polls. In terms of British constitutional development, it is an unprecedented step. In clause 1(2), the Government are taking a further significant step in the development of the United Kingdom constitution, by making the results of a referendum binding on the Government.

It is therefore appropriate to examine more closely the concept of majority, and to operate, by analogy with the agreement's other provisions, a 60 per cent. weighted majority.

Mr. Peter Robinson: My amendment No. 140 would have a similar impact to those tabled by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). I have worked out mathematically how, in the referendum—which was a poll of about 81 per cent. of the electorate—a simple majority under his amendments would have been about the same as under my amendment. There is therefore not a great mathematical difference in the outcome of our amendments.

The amendments tabled by me and by the right hon. Gentleman would further draw to the House's attention the issue that we debated when dealing with the previous group of amendments—that deciding a poll to go into a united Ireland on the basis of a simple majority would be a recipe for violence and disaster. Every member of the Committee can visualise and knows that that would be the outcome, yet the Bill contains provisions that—if such a majority were to be achieved at some stage in the future—would bring about that disaster .

My amendment would be better in two ways than those tabled by the right hon. Gentleman. First, my amendment is more consistent with the wording of the agreement, which states:

"Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

My amendment is very clear. It refers to a majority of those who are on the electoral register and not simply a majority of those who come out to vote. Indeed, one can visualise circumstances in which a majority in a referendum called for the purposes of making a determination on the issue could represent a significant minority of the people of Northern Ireland. In the circumstances that I outlined earlier, in which a simple majority would cause chaos and disaster, clearly a minority voting for a united Ireland—perhaps a majority of those who came out to vote, but a minority of the people of Northern Ireland—would clearly cause considerable violence in our community and would not produce a peaceful way forward.

The second reason why I believe that my amendment is better is that it is consistent with precedent. There is the precedent of the referendums in Scotland and Wales in which the Government recognised that it was not sufficient to have a simple majority deciding an important constitutional issue, so a majority of the electorate of Scotland and Wales was required to effect such a change.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman is aware that, on this occasion, the Welsh referendum made no such stipulation and a decision was made by a simple majority of those who voted.

Mr. Robinson: Earlier today, we saw something of the outcome of that. However, in previous referendums in Scotland and Wales the proposition that I am putting forward was the position.

Dr. Godman: When the hon. Gentleman refers to Scotland, is he talking about the referendum in 1979, with its weighted majority provision? May I point out to him that that decision, because of the weighted majority, left great disaffection and resentment throughout Scotland? The last referendum on 11 September 1997 was an entirely different affair.

Mr. Robinson: The hon. Gentleman will accept that the result was entirely different, too. If a majority of those voting in Northern Ireland voted for a united Ireland, but they represented a minority of the electorate and the people of Northern Ireland, there would certainly be very bitter resentment.

Under the wording of the agreement, it is not inconsistent for the Government to accept my amendment. It refers to

"the majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

As that is not defined in the terms of the agreement, it is open to the Government to define it. My amendment states:

"For the avoidance of doubt, in subsection (1) . . . 'the majority of the people of Northern Ireland' means an absolute majority of all those people who, on the date on which a poll is held under this section, would be entitled to vote as electors at a local election in a district electoral area in Northern Ireland."

Mr. McNamara: I was in the House at the time of the vote on a weighted majority in the Scottish referendum. It was a Labour amendment to a Government Bill and was carried with the support of the Unionist Tory party. It was a decision of the House that the Government of the day, who no longer had a majority, had to accept. However, it would be quite wrong to suggest that the present Labour Government—or even the Labour Government at the time—had embraced the Cunningham amendment and forced it on the people of Scotland in the way that has been suggested. It was accepted only in order to give the people of Scotland at least an opportunity to voice their opinion.

Anyone who was in the House at the time will remember the bitterness that the amendment engendered, not only in Scotland but generally, about English Members seeking to impose certain conditions on the people of Scotland.

Dr. Godman *rose—*

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. We seem to be discussing the situation in Scotland too much. It is all right to mention it in passing, but we should keep within the terms of the amendment, which are narrower than that. Does the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) want to intervene?

Dr. Godman: I merely wanted to remind my hon. Friend that weighted majorities have unintended consequences, as we discovered in Scotland. The people of Northern Ireland would find the same.

Mr. McNamara: I bear in mind what you have said, Mr. Martin, but you will recall that the burden of the speech of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) drew in aid the previous experience in Scotland, so I thought that the record should be put straight for those who were not fortunate enough to be here on those great and stirring occasions.

[Mr. McNamara]

The agreement was accepted by many parties. When my colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour party accepted the agreement, they did not accept the interpretation put forward by the Democratic Unionist party and others. There are many parties to the agreement. It would be wrong to suggest that my hon. Friend the Minister or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State could rewrite the agreement without recourse, sense, feeling or discussions with all the other parties.

Under the heading "Constitutional Issues", the agreement says:

"The participants endorse the commitment made by the British and Irish Governments that, in a new British-Irish Agreement replacing the Anglo-Irish Agreement, they will:

(i) recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland;

(ii) recognise that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

There is no mention of a weighted majority or the number of people entitled to vote. People understand and accept that that means a simple majority.

I am sure that none of the Unionist Members would insist that they had to have the support of 50 per cent. plus one of all those entitled to vote in their constituency to be able to sit in the House. Many of them are not in that position. If they won an election by one vote, they would not say, "Oh dear me! I cannot go along to the House of Commons and take my seat because I have got a majority of only one vote." We have never decided that a Government should cease to be the Government because they have a majority of only one. That is a foolish argument.

The aim of the amendments is to undermine the agreement. Those who support them want to achieve what they could not achieve by negotiation or by other means: they want to change the agreement as it was written and accepted in the referendum in Northern Ireland. I urge the Committee not to accept the amendments.

9.30 pm

Mr. Robert McCartney: I shall first deal with the lack of logic of the remarks of the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). To suggest that a constitutional change involving the political and national identity of, perhaps, upwards of 1 million people, in a highly charged and emotional situation, is in any way comparable with winning a parliamentary or other election by a small majority—whether it is one, two or 20 votes—indicates the wisdom of the aphorism that logic makes a very good servant but a very indifferent master. There is absolutely no common sense in such a comparison.

The main reason behind the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) is to recognise the important constitutional significance of a poll that would change fundamentally and basically that which most people consider to be of vital importance: their national and political identity. I can think of nothing worse than being a stateless person. To have such a sense of identity is fundamental to all of us; it is where we belong. Changing that sense of identity is so grave and significant that it ought not to be done on the basis of any analogy of winning an election by one vote.

I draw to the attention of the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), who may have been present at the time—it would have been of much greater importance had the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), the joint Minister designate in the Assembly, been present—that, during the first 14 months of negotiations which gave rise to the agreement, it was recognised by all present that the understanding was that

"Any overall package for agreement had to receive not a simple majority on both sides but a majority that would afford political efficacy to such an agreement."

Perhaps the right hon. Member for Upper Bann can confirm that those words were recorded by representatives of the two Governments in the talks. In practical terms, amendment No. 106 reflects that requirement.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann suggested that, although a majority of less than 60 per cent. would not represent an absolute ban on action, the matter would still be one for the Secretary of State's discretion. Unless such a majority is achieved, such a decision should not be taken lightly. If the majority is under 60 per cent., the decision to go ahead might be precatory, but, if it is over 60 per cent., the decision to act would be mandatory. To suggest that any Government would blithely, on the most simple of majorities, remove the national political status of 1 million of their citizens is beyond belief. No constitutional and democratic Government should be entertaining that if they intend to bring about what Harold Laski might have described as "social peace" of a substantial section of the community.

In effect, the hon. Member for Belfast, East has suggested an alternative: that the majority should be of those on the electoral roll. Again, comparisons can be odious, but in Wales barely more than 50 per cent. of those on the electoral roll actually voted, and a fraction more than 25 per cent. of those on the electoral roll took the decision, as it turned out, to have devolution for Wales.

As it happened, because of the nature of things in Wales, that was not crucial—but can we imagine a border poll taking place with only 51 per cent. of the electorate turning out to vote, and just over 25 per cent. of the entire population, who none the less form a simple majority of those actually voting, determining to remove the political and national identity of nearly 1 million people?

No one who seriously considered that prospect, and who had in mind the good government and social peace of those who would be affected by the decision, could, in my humble submission to the Committee, conceivably refuse to entertain one or other of the amendments.

The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) cited the section on "Constitutional Issues" in the agreement, but clause 1(i), which he quoted, refers to recognising

"the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

It does not say a simple majority, a majority of 60 per cent., or a majority of those on the electoral roll. It says:

"a majority of the people".

What is more, it was recognised by everyone—I hope that I can persuade the hon. Member for Hull, North to accept this—that all the parties present, and both Governments, in the negotiations leading up to the agreement, recognised and recorded the fact that the agreement reflecting the overall package had to be supported by more than a simple majority. The majority had to be of such a substantial kind as would lend not only political efficacy but political reality to what is being committed to law. I commend the amendments to the Committee.

Dr. Godman: I listened carefully to the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) and I think he said that a poll determining the future of 1 million people at an emotionally charged moment in the history of those people was not in any way analogous to a contest such as a parliamentary election.

Perhaps the hon. and learned Gentleman has a point there, but such a poll is comparable with a referendum in another country of some 5.5 million people. All that I can say, with reference to Scotland, is that our experience of weighted majorities in a referendum prompts me to argue against the amendment.

I can see that the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) is ready to jump to his feet, but in no way do I accept the contention that he offered us; that a referendum is a dangerous thing. In my view, Governments should hold referendums from time to time, as we did in Scotland and Wales.

Mr. Robert McCartney *rose—*

Mr. Thompson *rose—*

Dr. Godman: In a moment.

In terms of the comparative evidence in Scotland, there was a substantial majority for what even the hon. and learned Member for North Down would, I think, acknowledge will be radical constitutional change. That is what is in the Bill before us—radical constitutional change.

I understand some of the fears that have been voiced in connection with the amendments, but my view is that those people should be urged to engage in debate with constitutional nationalists about what has been said over the past few minutes, just as we engage in debate with our peaceable democratic secessionists. There are useful comparisons to be drawn, although I shall not argue for or against the hon. and learned Gentleman's analogy.

Mr. Thompson: I have a simple question for the hon. Gentleman. If the Parliament in Scotland decided to have a referendum on whether to take Scotland out of the United Kingdom, would he be prepared to accept a simple majority, even if a majority in the Parliament was opposed to the proposal?

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. The debate is going wide of the amendments before the Committee. Hon. Members must remember that amendments are narrow and that they should keep their arguments within the confines of those amendments.

Dr. Godman: I expected your intervention, Mr. Martin. I did not intend to answer that question.

The consent of the people in a mature parliamentary democracy must override the views of parliamentary representatives. For change to be given legitimacy, it must meet the expectations and concerns of the people whose lives will, in the words of the hon. and learned Member for North Down, be changed. In that sense, referendums have more legitimacy than some of the divisions that take place in our Parliaments and Assemblies.

Mr. Peter Robinson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Godman: I shall give way if the hon. Gentleman will bear in mind your strictures, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Robinson: Will the hon. Gentleman define the term used in the Bill—

"the majority of the people of Northern Ireland"?

What is a majority of the people of Northern Ireland as opposed to a majority of those voting?

Dr. Godman: That is a good question. In the custom and practice of referendums, we speak of those who have the right to vote in elections. The hon. Gentleman may say that he does not like that definition of a majority in Northern Ireland, but I do not understand how otherwise one can define a majority. That must be a simple majority, not a weighted one, because George Cunningham and his supporters did us no favours 19 or 20 years ago.

I have some understanding of the concerns of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), but he must continue engaging, as he has done so admirably up to now, in honourable debate with hon. Members such as constitutional nationalists who sit on this side of the Committee. The amendments are wrong in principle and they would be disastrous in practice.

Mr. Öpik: I have been examining the Belfast agreement. I assume that many of us accept that it is the starting point and that if we ever need help with interpretation we should return to the agreement to find out what it says.

There is a potential contradiction on pages 2 and 3 of the agreement that requires clarification. As the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) has already pointed out, on page 2, under "Constitutional Issues", the agreement states that the participants will,

"recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status".

On page 3, paragraph 2 of schedule 1 states:

"Subject to paragraph 3, the Secretary of State shall exercise the power under paragraph 1 if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland."

There is potential confusion there. On one page, the agreement seems to refer to 50 per cent. or more of those who are eligible to vote; on another, it seems to refer to 50 per cent. or more of those who choose to vote.

Mr. Robinson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there are two stages in the process? Even in the annexe,

[Mr. Robinson]

the first stage is referred to as requiring a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has to determine when the majority of the people of Northern Ireland wish to leave the United Kingdom. In that sense, the Secretary of State should be making such a determination based on the wish of a majority of the people, as opposed to a majority of the electorate or a majority of those who will be voting, but when the Secretary of State then calls a poll, under the annexe it will be based on a majority of those voting.

Mr. Öpik: As the hon. Gentleman demonstrates, the point needs to be clarified. That is exactly my concern. Given the seriousness of what will take place if such a referendum is held, it is important that we determine now exactly what we are looking for and what we would expect in this context. At least twice in those two pages there is a reference to a majority of those entitled to vote, and I seek clarification on that.

I should also like the Minister to explain what he sees as the role of the House of Commons before a referendum is held. Would it have a debate? What other role would it have before the Secretary of State initiated a referendum?

9.45 pm

Mr. Temple-Morris: I have been listening carefully and I hope that I am not alone in thinking that a certain unease is beginning to creep into the debate about the language used, not only in the amendments but in the various documents. During the debate on amendment No. 60, I disagreed very much with the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney). This time I pay him the compliment of saying that I listened to his speech carefully.

The constitutional significance of the Bill and the amendments, and of any referendum that might result, is enormous, so we must get this right. I do not like weighted majorities any more than anybody else, but we are dealing here—surely to goodness we all know it and that is why we are here—with a unique situation in our islands. That uniqueness may even go beyond our islands.

We must get this matter right. The language does not hang together. If the lawyer in some of us comes out, it does not appear to be quite right. The Bill is clear. Clause 1(1) refers to

"the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll".

Clause 1(2) contains the words

"expressed by a majority in such a poll".

Therefore, the Bill is clear enough.

I agree with the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) that the language of his amendment goes to the heart of the discrepancies more than the amendment so moderately moved by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) mentioned the Belfast agreement, but paragraph 1(v) of the agreement between the two Governments contains the words

"by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

That is a straight bland comment.

In the constitutional section at the beginning of her statement to the House, the Secretary of State referred to the principle of consent and said:

"Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and will stay that way for as long as that is the wish of a majority of people who live there".—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 479.]

That is another interpretation of it.

I make no plea, simply a statement to hon. Members from Northern Ireland that having another Division at this stage with the result that could emerge would belie the seriousness of the issue. We must hear the Front-Bench spokesmen, but, whatever we end up voting for, I hope that the language and the discrepancies will be worked out. I repeat that I do not like weighted majorities, but the seriousness of the situation deserves a symmetry of language.

Mr. McNamara: The Bill simply incorporates the draft clauses and schedules as contained in annexe A of the agreement, to which I refer my hon. Friend. That is what was agreed, and to depart from that would be to depart from the agreement.

Mr. Temple-Morris: My hon. Friend is the last person with whom I would want to disagree on that, but what he says does not alter the fact that, in other material documents and in agreements solemnly entered into by the two Governments, the language is at odds with the language of the Bill. The seriousness of the issue—a referendum and the constitutional results that would flow from it—merits a symmetry of language. I hope that the Minister will think about that both now and as consideration of the Bill progresses. If, afterwards, the Bill is the same, we shall no doubt vote on it in due course.

Mrs. Fyfe: I urge Unionist Members to think carefully about pressing the amendment to the vote, as some hon. Members have had bad experiences of such measures. The Bill must mean what it says when it specifies

"a majority of the people . . . voting in a poll".

How can the views of people who do not vote be taken into account? People can vote by postal ballot or by proxy, so anyone who is not totally brain dead may vote if he or she cares enough about the issue. If people do not vote, we must presume that they do not care much one way or the other. Only the views of those who vote in any ballot anywhere can be taken into account.

Such a poll will not fall from the skies; there will be one only if it is obvious that a clear current of opinion is running one way or the other. Who in their right mind would hold such a poll if they thought that the outcome was on a such knife edge that it could go 1 per cent. either way?

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The hon. Lady is talking about the wrong matter. There is no question that the views of those who have not voted will be taken into account. The clause specifically refers to

"a majority of the people in Northern Ireland voting in a poll".

As there are 1.6 million people in Northern Ireland, the clause must mean that 800,000 plus one must vote for any change in the constitution.

Mrs. Fyfe: My point is precisely that a majority of one is enough in any sensible voting system. However, it is

hardly likely that anyone would want to call a poll if he or she thought that it could be so close. To maintain peace and decency in civil society, one would want to ensure that the outcome was pretty clear one way or the other.

Throughout the debate, some Unionist Members have argued that people were deceived into voting 71 per cent. in favour of the agreement. If the people of Northern Ireland do not yet understand the consequences of voting one way or the other, they must be brain dead, as Northern Ireland has for a long time been one of the most thoroughly debated aspects of politics in these islands.

I earnestly warn people not to set up any fancy franchise. Such a franchise in 1979 did great harm to relations between Scotland and England; it led Scottish people to distrust people in England and was constantly held up as a reason not to vote Labour. If hon. Members are held responsible for a fancy franchise, they will risk incurring the resentment of people who are unhappy with the outcome for years to come.

Mr. McGrady: I draw the attention of the Committee to the agreement, which is absolutely clear about what is intended and, therefore, about what has been agreed.

On page 2 of the agreement, under the heading "Constitutional Issues" there are several paragraphs that comment generally on the subject matter and use the same terminology, stating that the status of Northern Ireland will be maintained

"save with the consent of a majority of its people".

That is the general interpretation of that expression. On the next page, we see that the parties and the two Governments making the agreement have specifically laid down the legislative terminology to which they would agree in terms of amendments to be made. Under the heading "Annex A: Draft Clauses/Schedules for Incorporation in British Legislation", the agreed form of words is:

"It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll held for the purposes of this section in accordance with Schedule 1."

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McGrady: Let me make my second point. Paragraph 1(2) under that heading states:

"But if the wish expressed by a majority in such a poll".

That refers to the previous paragraph, which refers to those

"voting in a poll held".

Therefore I would argue and submit to the Committee that that is precisely what is intended by the agreeing parties and the two Governments to be included in British legislation. There is no ambiguity whatsoever about what was agreed.

Mr. Taylor: I put to the hon. Gentleman the same point that I raised earlier. He has quoted annexe A paragraph 1 quite correctly. It states:

"without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll".

If there are 1.6 million people in Northern Ireland, what would be a simple majority?

Mr. McGrady: A simple majority in any interpretation of the English language is more than 50 per cent.

Mr. Taylor: So, 800,000 plus one.

Mr. McGrady: I am not here to define what the number will be under the electoral roll several years hence. I have no idea what it will be. I am saying simply that the agreement reached between the two Governments and the eight other parties referred to a majority voting in a poll. That is the precise terminology that we are dealing with in the Bill and there can be no variation from it if the agreement is to be upheld, as I sincerely hope that the Committee will do.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The Governments who have been handling this situation have always told the people of Northern Ireland that there is no change. They refer us to the Sunningdale agreement, which they have trotted out over and over again, and which states:

"the present status of Northern Ireland is that it is part of the United Kingdom. If, in the future, the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a United Ireland, the British Government would support that wish."

Then we turn to the Anglo-Irish agreement, because we are told that the Belfast agreement is a development of that. The Anglo-Irish agreement states:

"the two governments—Affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

That has been repeated over and over again by the Governments, but now we are not getting the majority of the people of Northern Ireland; we are getting the majority of those who take part in a poll, which is entirely different.

Mr. McNamara: Nonsense.

Rev. Ian Paisley: It is entirely different. The hon. Gentleman appears not to know the difference between the majority of people living in England and the majority of people who vote in an election or a referendum.

Mr. McGrady: Surely the hon. Gentleman is making the assumption that those who do not vote are, by not voting, expressing their views one way or the other. That is an impossible situation. Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that a vote can be interpreted only according to those saying yes and those saying no when voting on a particular for-or-against issue?

Rev. Ian Paisley: It is interesting to hear that comment now from the hon. Gentleman. When it came to the Sunningdale agreement, he told us, "You Unionists needn't worry; it rests with the majority." In the first referendum in Scotland—one hon. Member opposed it completely and said that he did not like what happened—a majority of people in the entire electorate were required to vote for devolution. That is what is in our amendment. *[Interruption.]*

The First Deputy Chairman: Order. There is so much background noise that I cannot hear what the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) is saying.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I was beginning to think that you would not profit if you could hear what I was saying, Mr. Martin.

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

This point has been laboured tonight, but it is an important issue. The Government must tell the people of Northern Ireland what they are saying now. They now claim that, in a poll—elected representatives will have no say about when it should be held—a simple majority of one could put us into a United Ireland, with no mention of safeguards for anyone. That is the real issue.

10 pm

Mr. Paul Murphy: It has been another interesting debate. Hon. Members who argue the case for the amendments—as they did for the last group—suggest that, if a bare majority of people voted in a referendum to become part of a united Ireland, it would plunge Northern Ireland into chaos and anarchy. Of course there are safeguards. To clarify an issue that raised its head in the previous debate, according to clause 1, the Secretary of State must come to the House after such a poll is held. I have now discovered something else lurking in clause 77(3) and schedule 1. In order for the mechanics of that poll to be agreed by Parliament, there would be an opportunity—I apologise to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) if I misinterpreted his remarks—for both Houses to review the Secretary of State's decision if it were judged rash and ill-defined and if it was believed that a border poll was being held without basis in reason or common sense. I have not the slightest doubt that hon. Members in this and the other place would point that out during such a debate.

Why do we resist the amendments? In the first instance, it is because they contradict what is in the agreement. The agreement is clear: we are talking about a majority of those who vote. The word "majority" is used in other contexts, but it is defined in clause 1: it is a majority of those who vote. I cannot see any other way of doing it.

During the talks, there was barely a mention of a weighted majority. Many hon. Members present in the Chamber tonight would not be here if they had to rely on weighted majorities; many hon. Members would love to have a majority of 50 per cent. plus one. Several hon. Members have referred to the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, which refers to a majority of people voting in a border poll. Border polls have been held before, but there was no mention in the 1973 Act of a weighted majority of 60 or 70 per cent. It refers only to a majority of people in Northern Ireland, and many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for North Antrim, supported that idea.

Hon. Members have mentioned the 1978 experience, which placed into Acts of Parliament reference to a majority of those on the electoral register. I remember the occasion very well. My predecessor in my constituency was instrumental, with Mr. Cunningham, in drawing up the amendments that the House of Commons had to agree in order to pass the devolution package. In my inexperienced days when I was in my 20s, I supported such a move—I was not a Member of Parliament—although, in hindsight, I was wrong. It left in Scotland a legacy of bitterness that has lasted until this day because people felt that they had been cheated out of the result.

How else could we have determined, in the recent referendums in Wales, Scotland and London, whether people wanted change other than by how the majority of those who came out to vote, voted? We do not know how those who stayed at home would have voted. We can only make assumptions, but we cannot go by assumptions. We can make judgments only from the majority vote of those who vote in the polls.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Is the Minister suggesting that any poll result in Northern Ireland, like that which occurred in Wales, would be anything but utterly disastrous for social or political peace in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Murphy: In Wales, we had a small majority—6,000 out of a population of 3.5 million. It could not have been much smaller. Obviously, I accept that there is a difference between Wales and Northern Ireland. There was much speculation about the referendum on the agreement. People asked what would happen if the majority was 50 or 55 per cent.; some said that, to be acceptable, the majority would have to be 80 per cent., while others said that it would have to be 70 per cent. Naturally, the more people who vote in a referendum the better, and those of us who supported the agreement were delighted that some 72 per cent. voted in favour of it.

Where does this argument begin and end? We can only say that a majority is a majority, which is why, essentially, we cannot change it. The agreement, printed word for word in the Bill, says that, when a matter is put to the test, it is tested on a majority of people in Northern Ireland who want to vote on it. Because the matter is so crucial to the people of Northern Ireland, I have not the slightest doubt that, were such a poll to be held, a very high percentage of people would vote and we could rely on the result.

Mr. Grieve: Does the Minister agree that one can say with certainty of those who do not vote in elections that they do not consider the matter serious enough to go out and cast a vote? That is what it boils down to, whether we are talking about elections or referendums.

Mr. Murphy: I entirely agree with that point.

However, these are hypothetical matters and we do not know when those border polls would be held. All we can say is that the agreement is clear. Consent is the most important principle and consent can be tested only by the majority vote of those who take the trouble to vote.

Mr. Trimble: I apologise to those hon. Members present for the fact that we have spent far too long discussing this issue in view of all the other matters to be considered, so I shall try to keep my closing comments brief.

The Minister gave an effective reply to the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), but at no time did he touch on my amendment, because it would not change the majority for the efficacy of the vote, and neither does it purport to do so. It relates purely to the binding character of the vote. Clause 1(2) places an obligation on the Secretary of State, and the effect of the amendment would be that, if the vote were less than 60 per cent., the Secretary of State would not be under

an obligation, but would have to consider what to do. She would not be bound by the vote and would thus be in the same position as the Government are at present with regard to every referendum that has been held in the United Kingdom. None of the referendums held in the United Kingdom has been binding; all have been purely advisory. The amendment would preserve that position.

I was greatly struck by the point made by the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) about the unintended consequences of weighted majorities. However, everything has unintended consequences, and we must bear that in mind when framing legislation. We may be unable to predict the precise circumstances that will arise at a future date, so it is important to preserve discretion. That is what my amendment would do. However, we have debated the matter and have registered views. In view of the hour, and the fact that we have many more important things to consider, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Trimble: I beg to move amendment No. 105, in page 1, line 15, after 'of', insert 'the Republic of'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 162, in clause 67, page 31, line 37, after 'of', insert 'the Republic of'.

Mr. Trimble: Amendment No. 105 is simple. It merely complies with existing legislation by calling the Republic of Ireland by its correct name in British constitutional law. From 1949 until now, the entity previously known as the Irish Free State, and properly known under its own constitution as Eire, has been referred to within the United Kingdom as the Republic of Ireland. There has been no legislation to change that.

The Government will rely on the fact that the Ireland Act 1949 used the word "may", but that has to be interpreted in the context of the time and the circumstances. It was regarded then, and has been until now, as fixing for the purpose of our legislation the name of the entity in the other part of the island of Ireland as the Republic of Ireland. If the Government want to change things, let them table an amendment to the 1949 Act, but let them not assume that they can change legislation by the exercise of prerogative.

Mr. Peter Robinson: There are at least two instances in the Bill where reference is made to "the Government of Ireland", at clauses 1 and 67. I tabled amendments to both. I was surprised that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) had tabled an amendment to clause 1 in the same terms, because the sloppy and slovenly drafting of the agreement probably caused the problem. The right hon. Gentleman accepted that terminology when he accepted the agreement, because those are precisely the words contained in the agreement. I am glad that he now realises that it is proper to correct the work that he did not properly do at an earlier drafting stage.

I can think of no past legislation referring to "the Government of Ireland". Ireland is an island; it has on it two states. It is clear from the terminology used in legislation that reference to those whom we describe as the Dublin Government is reference to the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Reference to "the Government of Ireland" suggests that Ireland as a whole has one Government. Quite clearly, that is the tendency in the Bill, which intends to advance such a notion.

I hope that the Minister will make it clear that he will follow the proper terminology, which has been used consistently in legislation, and I note that reference was made in the recent decommissioning scheme to the Government of the Republic of Ireland. I hope that he will correct what has happened, although he cannot say that the Government had not noticed the terminology and that it was an accident. When his legal team went through the consultative process with my colleagues and me, it was pointed out to them on several occasions that the term "Ireland" had been used. It was also used in the discarded clause 26, in terms of authorities in Ireland.

I trust that the slovenly work of those who drafted the agreement has simply been carried through and that the Minister is about to correct it.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I drew the Government's attention to this matter when they published the agreement. I was told that it was a printer's error which would be changed. All the agreements that went out in Northern Ireland used the words

"for Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland"

and

"for the Government of Ireland".

They said that that was a mistake and that they would correct it. The official document, which is issued by the Table Office, also uses the words

"For the Government of Ireland".

In Europe, the Government of Ireland started to behave in the same way. They began to dilute the name of the Government here—the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) will remember that we went to the authorities in Europe and had the correction made. This was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Republic was officially called the Republic of Ireland. I think that the House should at least be the custodian of its own bailiwick, and should call the Government of the Republic what it is, according to its own standing.

10.15 pm

Mr. McNamara: I do not intend to delay the Committee for long, but I must repeat that making the proposed change would substantially alter the content of the agreement and the draft clauses in annexe A, which speak of the Government of Ireland.

It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) speak of two states on the island of Ireland. I thought that there was one state, and part of a state. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a declaration of unilateral independence, that is up to him, but Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: No, with great respect.

There is much more in this than is immediately apparent—

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: No, not for a moment or two.

It is not for me to go into all the history, and the phraseology, of what has or has not been the name of the state in the southern bit of the northern part of the island of Ireland. That has been the subject of controversy on many occasions, in different contexts. The agreement contains draft clauses; the draft clauses are, in effect, in the Bill. That is the agreement. Let us not nitpick; let us leave it as it is.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: I am willing to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but I thought that the Committee wanted to make progress.

Mr. John D. Taylor: I am interested by the hon. Gentleman's argument that using the term "Republic of Ireland"—which is, of course, the correct constitutional name for the country concerned—in some way changes the agreement, because the agreement refers to the Government of Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, as his argument suggests, that, as "Northern Ireland" is the description of my part of the United Kingdom that is used in the agreement, those who now refer to it simply as "the north of Ireland" are changing the terms of the agreement?

Mr. McNamara: If it is referred to as Northern Ireland in the agreement, it should be referred to as Northern Ireland in the Bill.

Mr. Paul Murphy: I apologise to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). I was carried away in the last debate, but I shall undoubtedly talk to him about the matters that he raised.

When I first took up my Northern Ireland post, I was struck by the importance of terminology. I think that terminology is more important in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom. I remember going to Derry city council, in the town of Londonderry, and hoping not to use any name during a two-hour meeting, because it is difficult to please everyone.

In this instance, we cannot accept the amendments. Let me explain why. The most important reason is this. During the talks that led to the agreement, there was an understanding between the two Governments that this Government would refer to "the Government of Ireland"—which they can do: as the right hon. Member for Upper Bann said, under the 1949 Act that is permissible, although not mandatory. Significantly, however, we referred to "the Government of Ireland" because that is how the Irish Government described themselves. Even more significantly, the Irish Government, for the first time ever, described our Government as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As a result, that is contained in the declaratory aspects of the Bill.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Is the declaration in the agreement and that terminology in the legislation that went before the Dail in Dublin?

Mr. Murphy: I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman with an answer to that. The legislation before the Dail is different from this Bill.

During the talks that led to the agreement, the Irish Government, for the first time ever, referred to our Government as I have just described.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Clause 1(2) does not refer to the "Government of Great Britain and Northern Ireland", as the Minister has just implied. It refers to the "Government of the United Kingdom."

Mr. Murphy: During the talks and in the agreement, the Irish Government used that terminology for the first time ever. The right hon. Gentleman knows that that terminology was used during the negotiations.

Mr. Thompson: Do not the facts that the Minister has revealed to the House give credence to the view held by many people in Northern Ireland that the Government want to detach Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom, and that that is why they agreed to this change? Rather than refer to the Republic of Ireland, the Bill refers to Ireland. Surely that revelation will show to the people of Northern Ireland that the real basis of the agreement and this legislation is eventually to detach Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom.

Mr. Murphy: That is a load of nonsense. That is not the case. The debate has centred on the principle of consent. It is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide whether they wish to remain within the United Kingdom or to become part of a united Ireland.

Mr. Thompson: The Minister says that it is up to the people of Northern Ireland, but the Government wish that the people of Northern Ireland would leave the United Kingdom.

Mr. Murphy: We have not said anything of the sort. It is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide their destiny and their future. If the majority of the people want to be British citizens, so be it. That is the purpose of the agreement.

The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) made a valid point about the clause. I draw his attention to the fact that clause 1 is a straight word-for-word transfer from the agreement into the Bill. The British-Irish agreement, which is at the back of the Belfast agreement, states:

"AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND".

That is the international aspect of the agreement.

Mr. Peter Robinson: The Minister's remarks will cause great consternation in Northern Ireland. The Government

of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have accepted, in some secret understanding with the Dublin Government, that that Government will be called the Government of Ireland. In all legislation from now on and in all official documentation, the Dublin Government will be referred to as the Government of Ireland. That is totally unacceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. Would the Minister like to tell us about any other secret deals?

Mr. Murphy: That was not secret, because a copy of the agreement went to every house in Northern Ireland. Perhaps it did not go to the hon. Gentleman's house. It says in big letters:

"AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND".

It is as clear as crystal, and is in the international agreement attached to the Belfast agreement, a copy of which went through every letter box in every house in the Province of Northern Ireland.

Mr. John D. Taylor: The Minister is breaching the agreement. He has quoted the agreement correctly, but the legislation does not refer to the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: it merely refers to the Government of the United Kingdom, so the Minister is breaching the agreement.

Mr. Murphy: Clause 1 is a transfer word for word from the agreement. The international agreement that is attached to the Belfast agreement refers to the

"United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland".

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the Minister bring to the Dispatch Box the southern Ireland version of the agreement and read out what is in it? He has read out what is in his: tell us what is in the other version.

Mr. Murphy: I am quite convinced that it is the same, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman about that.

Whatever the geographical misunderstanding—there may be a misunderstanding about what is meant by the term "Ireland"—in the rest of the legislation we shall refer to the Republic of Ireland to distinguish it from Northern Ireland. That is clear. As I have said, the words in clause 1 are straight from the agreement, word for word. I hope that hon. Members understand the significance of the fact that the Irish Government have at last recognised that the United Kingdom includes Northern Ireland. That was a significant attachment. *[Interruption.]* There are no secret deals or secret this or that in any of this.

Mr. Grieve: I completely understand the Minister's point and the reasons for the use of the term Government of Ireland. He has satisfied me on that. It is right, is it not, that, in the preliminary part of the Bill, it would be perfectly possible to define the United Kingdom as being the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland without in any way impinging upon the wording of the agreement? It may be argued that that is an exercise in semantics, but if it provided reassurance it could properly be done at a later stage of the Bill's progress.

Mr. Murphy: We shall check on some of the points that have been made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor). We believe that, under the Interpretation Act 1978, any reference in legislation to the United Kingdom means the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we are checking on that.

Mrs. Fyfe: Does my hon. Friend agree that at international bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe, a placard in front of our delegation simply stating "United Kingdom" is understood to mean Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr. Murphy: I am not sure that everybody understands that. I returned from Belfast some weeks ago by air—I shall not say by which company—and on arrival in Heathrow we saw a sign stating "Welcome to the United Kingdom". I am sure we all regard that as quite improper.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I understand the Minister's difficulties. Many people think that the United Kingdom is England. The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) may recall that at the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in Ottawa, delegates from the Republic of Ireland moved that in the IPU the title United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should be changed to the United Kingdom. That was adopted by a majority vote, against the wishes of the British delegates and others. As the Minister said, we must be careful. When we use titles, we should use them correctly.

Mr. Murphy: I certainly agree that United Kingdom does not mean England: there are other places as well.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) asked about the Irish version of the agreement. I have checked. The Irish version is exactly the same. It refers to the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and, of course, that is a key change because in previous practice all agreements had two versions—one Irish and one British. The Irish version certainly refers to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The point has been well made in the debate that we must take great care.

My main concern in this matter is that we do not alter clause 1 because it is part of the agreement. We are conscious of the nature of the comments made by hon. Members and the sensitivities surrounding the issue. However, I believe that we have sufficient safeguards in the Interpretation Act and other measures and I ask the House to reject the amendment.

10.30 pm

Mr. Trimble: I am sorry to disagree with the Minister again, but he misinterpreted what I said about the Ireland Act 1949. I did not say that its terms were permissive; I was merely anticipating that he would say that. I was pointing out to him that it was intended to fix, for United Kingdom use, the term that would be used to describe what hitherto had been known as the Irish Free State. From then until now, it has been consistent practice to use the term "Republic of Ireland".

If a change is to be made, it should be made properly through the legislation. There is a strong argument that the Minister is currently acting contrary to the 1949 Act and is not really putting the matter on a proper footing.

[Mr. Trimble]

Some of the points of concern expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) about subsection (2) stem from its rather convoluted—perhaps the word is "curious"—language. It states:

"as may be agreed between Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Government of Ireland."

I wonder why the phrase, "in the United Kingdom" was used. There was no need for it—it could simply have said, "between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of". Perhaps the Minister would explain the thinking behind that.

We have made the point that the Government have made a mistake in the agreement into which they have entered—

Mr. Peter Robinson: You signed it.

Mr. Trimble: I am referring to the treaty between the two Governments. I have not signed anything; the hon. Gentleman knows better than that.

The Government have made a mistake that will lead to confusion. However, so that we can move on and discuss some other amendments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

THE FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN, *being of the opinion that the principle of the clause and any matters arising thereon, had been adequately discussed in the course of debate on the amendments proposed thereto, forthwith put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 68 (Debate on clause standing part),* That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

Question agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1

POLLS FOR THE PURPOSES OF SECTION 1

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North–East Cambridgeshire): I beg to move amendment No. 37, in page 39, line 18, leave out 'including' and insert 'except'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 19, in clause 26, page 13, line 42, at end insert

', except that he shall not by order create criminal offences'.

No. 36, in clause 72, page 33, line 34, after 'franchise', insert

'nor the creation of criminal offences'.

Mr. Moss: In the interests of getting through a little more business this evening, I shall be brief. The amendments deal with the creation of criminal offences by Order in Council. Amendment No. 37 refers to schedule 1; No. 36 to clause 72; and No. 19 to clause 26.

The powers conferred on the Secretary of State in schedule 1 refer to the poll on the future of Northern Ireland, and the powers in clause 26 relate to elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, whereas the Government's powers in clause 72 refer to elections to district councils. In each case, the Bill gives the Government, either directly or through the Secretary of State, the power, by Order in Council, to create criminal offences relating to the elections. That is specifically referred to in schedule 1, and implicity referred to in clauses 26 and 72, as the power is not excluded.

Amendment No. 37 would change the word "including" in line 18 to "except", to make it clear that the Secretary of State does not have the power to create new categories of criminal offence by Order in Council.

Amendment No. 36 would insert in line 34 the words

"nor the creation of criminal offences",

after "franchise", making it crystal clear that creating such offences is not one of the Government's powers.

Amendment No. 19 would add the words

"except that he shall not by order create criminal offences"

to section 26(4).

We believe that an Order in Council is quite the wrong vehicle for such measures, which are best and most properly dealt with in primary legislation.

Mr. Paul Murphy: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has had an opportunity, even at a very late stage, to speak to that group of amendments. However—I fear that I shall have to disappoint him—the Government oppose the amendments. We believe that we have the power under those sections of the Bill to create criminal offences by orders.

Although there is nothing new about creating offences through subordinate legislation, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that creating offences is an important decision. However, the ability is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, which gives Parliament an opportunity fully to debate a draft order. I should draw the Committee's attention to the Northern Ireland Negotiations (Referendum) Order 1998 and the New Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order 1998—with which I know the hon. Gentleman was involved. Those measures were debated by the House only a couple of months ago, and included provisions to combat electoral fraud, which I know is a particular concern of Northern Ireland Members.

We believe that it is very important for the opportunities and flexibility offered by the Bill to be maintained. I must disappoint the hon. Gentleman. We resist the amendments.

Mr. Moss: The Minister did not say that legislation for England, Wales or Scotland, for example, contains provision for such a procedure. Is he simply saying that the procedure should apply only to Northern Ireland? If so, why is it necessary that important measures—providing the ability to create new criminal offences in elections, for example—should pertain only to Northern Ireland? Should not the House have an opportunity to discuss such provisions in primary legislation on the Floor of the House and in Committee rather than by affirmative resolution of an Order in Council?

Mr. Murphy: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. The Opposition expressed similar doubts when we were considering the legislation on Scotland. However, I believe that there are special circumstances, and that—in some of the points we are dealing with on electoral

offences—there is a need for speed of legislation. I would be the last person to delay any change in law designed to stamp out electoral fraud, wherever it might exist.

Mr. Moss: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Clause 2

PREVIOUS ENACTMENTS

Mr. William Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 134, in page 1, line 16, at beginning insert '(1)'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 107, in page 1, line 17, at end add—

'(2) This section is to come into force on the day appointed under section 3.'.

No. 135, in page 1, line 17, at end add—

'(2) If the Assembly has passed with cross community support a resolution praying that this provision should come into force the Secretary of State may lay a draft of an Order before Parliament to bring this provision into force.

(3) The Assembly shall not consider any resolution under (2) above until more than 12 months after the appointed day.'

Mr. Ross: You will see, Mr. Martin—it is quite evident—that amendment No. 134 is consequential on amendment No. 135, although, in some respects, the latter amendment is consequential on the former one. My right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has tabled amendment No. 107, which generally tries to achieve the same objective—equity of treatment between the constitution of the Irish Republic and the constitution of the United Kingdom.

The Government of Ireland Act 1920 was, of course, intent on preserving the unity of the Kingdom. The agreement's position on the matter is quite clear—throughout this debate we have heard quite a lot about the agreement, and about how sacrosanct it is. Paragraph 7(5), on page 4—under "Annex B: Irish Government Draft Legislation to Amend the Constitution"—states:

"If such a declaration is not made within twelve months of this section being added to this Constitution or such longer period as may be provided for by law, this section shall cease to have effect and shall be omitted from every official text of this Constitution published thereafter."

The Government of the Irish Republic are changing their constitution and publishing the changes. Then, if things do not work out as they envisage, they will go back to the status quo. The United Kingdom Government, however, are removing the last vestiges of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 from the statute book with no possibility of bringing them back. Therefore, there could be circumstances in which the United Kingdom will have changed the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, but the constitution of the Irish Republic will not have changed at all. Indeed, it may revert to the present position and restore its territorial claim.

The Irish Government's position is "Heads I win; tails I win" and that is not acceptable. If, under certain circumstances, it is possible for the Irish Republic to restore the status quo, the United Kingdom should be in exactly the same position. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and the Government should make it perfectly plain that they intend to retain the status quo for Northern Ireland in British constitutional law should things not work out as envisaged.

In a characteristically modest mood, my right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann has tabled an amendment that states:

"This section is to come into force on the day appointed under section 3."

I would go a little further. My amendment was born out of long experience in the practical marketplace and dealing with folk, when giving away one's position before being dead certain of getting one's price frequently led to giving something away without getting anything in return. My right hon. Friend's amendment promises to do something on the appointed day. The Dublin Government are saying, "Regardless of that, we intend to have our pound of flesh". It is only sensible that the United Kingdom Government should retain their freedom of action and not wipe out the Government of Ireland Act 1920 completely.

The Dublin changes are not giving up claim to sovereignty, but shifting it from territory to people in a very explicit way, and the United Kingdom Government accept that. Under the new statement that the Irish are adopting, all those born in the island of Ireland are entitled to Irish citizenship. That is the present position. It does not matter whether or not they are born in the United Kingdom, they still have that freedom of choice of nationality.

As the Minister will know, dual citizenship is an interesting concept which is not universally recognised and respected. Different countries take very different views. Some interpret it loosely and casually. The Irish Republic allow one's grandparents to give one Irish citizenship, even if two generations have been born overseas. In other countries, only those who are born within the country—regardless of who their parents are—can claim citizenship.

Mr. John D. Taylor: If the Republic did not have that rule, it would not have a football team.

Mr. Ross: Of course we understand that, and the benefits of having footballers trained in England is evident at times. Sometimes, we are far too lax in our interpretation of who should and who should not be allowed to be a citizen. Citizenship not only brings benefits; it demands responsibilities. If that balance is drawn too loosely, people can gain the benefits without having to show the responsibility and commitment to a country that should go with citizenship. There should not be benefits without responsibility.

As a consequence of the agreement, some have said in recent weeks that they are Irish citizens and that the Government of the Irish Republic should interfere on their behalf in Northern Ireland. There have been demands in some articles in the *Irish Post* over here that the Irish Government should interfere on behalf of Irish people who have lived here for many years.

10.45 pm

The subject is bigger than the Bill or the agreement. The situation will be exploited ruthlessly by Irish nationalism and Irish republicanism in the years ahead. We should not allow the Irish Government to get away with that. We should pin them down and make it plain that there is a quid pro quo. We should be prepared to do away with the remnants of the 1920 Act only if the claim on territory is changed. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

The logic of my position is inescapable. I hope that the Minister will see fit to accept the amendment.

Mr. Paul Murphy: We cannot shift from the words of the agreement on clause 2, but I may have some good news for the hon. Gentleman, because another part of the Bill satisfies his demands.

The concept of balanced constitutional change in both jurisdictions lies at the heart of the agreement. The amendments to the Irish constitution that were agreed in the referendum on 22 May will be implemented. The essence of the amendments is that there should be parity of change involving the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the Irish constitution.

The Secretary of State will be able to exercise her powers under clause 82(3) so that the clause comes into effect at the same time as the amendment to the Irish constitution. That means that there will be equality in the constitutional change in both jurisdictions. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) and that he will withdraw his amendment.

Mr. William Ross: Under the circumstances, I shall withdraw my amendment, but only to study the Minister's words carefully in writing. My amendment No. 135 would insert a long delay—the same minimum one year delay that Dublin is demanding. The clause that the Minister has referred to does not go that far. However, I shall study what he has said. I hope to come back to the amendment on Report, but, in the meantime, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 282, Noes 9.

Division No. 346] **[10.49 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*

Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha

Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Forsythe, Clifford
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
Paisley, Rev Ian
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Thompson, William

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Robinson and Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

It being after three hours after the commencement of proceedings, THE FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN *proceeded to put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings to be concluded at that hour.*

Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clauses 5 and 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 4 agreed to.

Clauses 7 to 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Committee report progress: to sit again tomorrow.

Air Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

11.2 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased to have the opportunity at this late hour to discuss air safety. Recent growth in the number of passengers and the volume of freight travelling by air has been phenomenal. It is expected that the number of passengers carried will increase by about 4 per cent. per annum until 2006, and demand for freight capacity is expected to double over the next 10 years.

If travellers' perception of air travel is to remain that of a very safe form of transport, safety standards must be improved year on year. I am not suggesting that air travel is dangerous. Clearly, it is safer than travel by car, bus or train, but, with summer travel reaching its peak, passengers want to know that everything is being done to ensure their safety in the air. That means reducing the external risk of collisions, and minimising the internal risks caused by passengers' loutish behaviour or poor cabin design.

Some measures that could improve safety are worth detailed examination and a considered response from the Minister, which I am sure that they will receive. Some have been raised with me by a senior air traffic controller at West Drayton, others by members of the air safety group, which I sponsor. The group consists of ex-pilots and ex-engineers with a particular interest in the safety aspects of the industry, so their concerns cannot be dismissed lightly.

First, there are the points raised by the air traffic controller. In his view, at peak times, sector capacity is regularly being exceeded, and many potential incidents are simply not being reported. He mentions, for instance, an incident in the south of England a couple of days ago, when, because air traffic controllers in his sector were fully occupied with resolving one problem, they failed to spot the emergence of a potentially dangerous situation. Fortunately, it was spotted by air traffic controllers from another sector.

Sector overload could explain the sharp increase in the number of the most serious air misses. Those are few in number, but they have risen from 12 in 1993 to 30 in 1996, and with 13 incidents reported in the first four months in 1997, the period for which the most recent figures are available, they could be even higher in 1997, making perhaps a threefold increase in just five years.

I call on the Government and the safety regulatory group to look again at the allowed flow of between 42 and 46 aircraft movements per hour per sector, and to consider reducing that period to perhaps 30 minutes. That would help to smooth out dangerous peaks in aircraft movements.

The next issue that the senior air traffic controller was concerned about was European co-operation on air traffic control matters. That is limited. For instance, French controllers currently point many aircraft at Boulogne to get them out of French airspace as quickly as possible, with little regard for the difficulties that that causes air traffic controllers this side of the channel. I understand that United Kingdom air traffic controllers return the favour. Therefore, he urges rapid progress on a European

[Mr. Tom Brake]

air traffic control system, as does Lockheed Martin, representatives of which spoke to me today. They consider that co-operation at Government level is particularly important to ensure the rapid implementation of such a system.

I come finally to National Air Traffic Services. The senior air traffic controller's concerns in relation to NATS are not related to the delays that are being experienced in building the replacement software system. I think that all agree that the initial targets for building that system were far too ambitious. His concerns relate to the impact that the development of the system is having on staffing levels at West Drayton. He said that there are chronic manpower shortages, partly because staff are being drafted into Swanwick to test the new system there.

On an even more serious note, the senior air traffic controller drew my attention to a report produced by the 50 air traffic controllers working on testing the new system, which describes the system as fatally flawed. A method of operation has yet to be identified. There is some debate about whether all that is required to implement an acceptable method of operation are some minor system changes, but the current perception is that it will not work. He is also extremely worried about the stress levels of air traffic controllers, whether they use the old or the new system. I hope that the Minister will respond on that point, if not now in the near future.

I, too, have concerns about NATS, and specifically its privatisation, which I oppose, along with at least 16 Labour Members of Parliament who have signed an early-day motion opposing it.

Will the Minister explain what impact she expects privatisation plans will have on the delivery date of the new software system in Swanwick and in Prestwick? Can she guarantee that the first call on the proceeds of any privatisation of NATS will be for air safety initiatives?

I come now to some points raised by the air safety group. Drunken and rowdy air passengers may at first seem a comic business, but they are increasingly a cause of concern to airlines. The number of serious incidents involving drunken passengers has increased significantly—in 1993 there were 13, whereas in 1997 there were 62, although I think that those figures apply only to British Airways, so the total could be higher.

Will the Minister consider implementing in the United Kingdom the rules that the Federal Aviation Authority has implemented in the United States, whereby the only alcohol that airline passengers may consume is that supplied by the airlines? Will she also, at the suggestion of British Airways, ask the Civil Aviation Authority to increase penalties for all misbehaviour that is punishable under the air navigation order—which the authority updates annually—and extend it to cover other kinds of disruptive behaviour, such as the use of personal stereos, laptops or mobile phones when the captain has instructed that they should be switched off?

The air safety group believes that much more could be done to improve cabin safety. In 1991, the Select Committee on Transport issued a report called "Aircraft Cabin Safety", which contained recommendations to improve cabin safety, although I regret to say that many of them have not been implemented. The recommendations included better seat belts and improving the cabin crew's line of vision in the cabin. The Committee also recommended additional guidelines on the structural integrity of the plane, so that, for example, the fuel tanks were not ruptured in emergency alighting conditions. Will the Government undertake a review of all the outstanding recommendations and will they implement any of the key safety recommendations that have yet to be acted on?

I want an assurance from the Government that the United Kingdom will maintain its strict standards on flight time limitations. In the past, the European Union has tried to loosen regulations, so I hope that the Government will maintain a strong position.

It has been suggested that automated cockpits were responsible for the crash of a Taiwanese airbus. The problem is that, in some circumstances, pilots are unable to overrule the automatic pilot. Will the Government and the appropriate regulatory bodies examine both the training that pilots receive—concern has been expressed that the technical manuals that accompany automated pilots are insufficiently comprehensible—and the desirability of the extensive use of fly-by-wire technology?

I know that the Government will soon issue a White Paper on aviation, which I hope will deal with some or all of the safety issues that I have mentioned. There is no room for complacency about air safety. Over the next few weeks, hundreds of thousands of people will jet off for a well-deserved break; they will want the toughest standards in the world to apply to their journeys.

11.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) for raising such an important subject despite the lateness of the hour, affording himself the opportunity to raise the concerns of his group and me the opportunity to reiterate the Government's commitment to attach the highest possible priority to aviation safety.

As the hon. Gentleman said, aviation is a rapidly growing industry. Demand for air travel is expected to grow at 5 per cent. annually well into the new millennium, and the United Kingdom airline industry has doubled in size over the past 10 years. Increasing numbers of UK residents enjoy affordable holidays at a growing number of overseas destinations: 18 million holidays abroad were taken by air by UK residents in 1996; and Heathrow is the largest international airport in the world, handling 56 million passengers in 1996.

Britain's aviation safety record is excellent, but we share the hon. Gentleman's view that we cannot and must not be complacent. The effort that has made our aviation industry both successful and safe must continue to be made by all concerned: by those in the industry itself and those responsible for supporting and regulating that industry—the Government, the Civil Aviation Authority and its subsidiary company, National Air Traffic Services, or NATS.

We must also be prepared to make changes when changes become necessary. Recently, we announced our plans for the future of NATS. Our preferred option—a public-private partnership—will give NATS the freedom to borrow from the private sector for investment and business development, while retaining a significant public stake in the company. We believe that that will enable

NATS better to meet the challenges of the future, which is in itself good news for air safety. Most important, safety regulation will be made independent of service provision. The safety regulator will ensure that safety remains the overriding priority.

Our intention to review arrangements for safety regulation across all transport modes announced in our White Paper on integrated transport policy will take into account all aspects of air safety regulation. Safety for British skies and British passengers world wide requires international effort. That is why we were so determined during our presidency of the European Union to make real progress towards setting up a European aviation safety authority. An important first step in setting up a strong and effective safety body, establishing high and uniform levels of safety throughout Europe, was taken by Transport Ministers last month.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the need for European control and, as I am sure he is aware, that, too, is an area in which the Government are playing a leading role, by promoting such proposals within Europe. We have also been at the forefront in calling for safety audits by the International Civil Aviation Organisation for all countries world wide. Indeed, we were the first major aviation state to ask ICAO to audit our own Civil Aviation Authority. That request and, indeed, the assessment were welcomed by the CAA.

Day-to-day safety regulation of the UK industry is the statutory responsibility of the CAA, and we have every confidence that the authority is alive to the challenges facing air safety, as is the hon. Gentleman. The authority is no more content to live on its reputation than we are. The CAA does not simply react to the last accident: it analyses the circumstances in which various accidents and incidents occur world wide in order to focus its actions on ensuring continuing improvements in safety. The authority has set itself the primary objective of ensuring that the frequency of accidents does not rise in line with increased traffic.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific issues, and I have already described how our proposals for NATS will help to strengthen air safety. Air traffic control issues figured prominently in his speech. I assure the House that there is no question of the UK's air traffic control system breaking down. Safety is always the top priority in air traffic control—indeed, the number of risk-bearing airproxes where NATS controller error was a causal factor has been declining steadily, and the total for January to June of this year is likely to be only one.

All possible steps are taken to prevent such incidents occurring, but the fact is that human error cannot be eradicated completely. What we do and must continue to do is learn from each incident and ensure that the safety system as a whole prevents incidents from developing into accidents.

All airprox incidents are subject to thorough investigation. Airprox reports by pilots are examined by the joint airprox working group, and reports by air traffic controllers by the joint airprox assessment panel. In addition, the air accidents investigation branch has the right on any occasion to institute its own investigation. The CAA follows up any recommendations carefully. Similarly, incidents of overload, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, are thoroughly investigated. Air traffic controllers have the option of introducing flow management measures to ensure that no more traffic than can be handled safely is allowed into the system.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister respond to the specific point—perhaps she was about to come to it—regarding whether there is scope for reducing the one-hour period over which flow is measured, so as to ensure that there are not massive peaks within any given hour? That problem would be ironed out if the time frame were much shorter.

Ms Jackson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the arrival of aircraft often depends upon issues that are often beyond anyone's control. They have to do with weather conditions, air speed and, not least, where the aircraft departed from initially.

I would be hard pressed to give a categorical assurance on the one-hour issue, given the number of air traffic movements in our skies. I reiterate that it is within the power of air traffic controllers to manage the aircraft flow and to ensure that there is no danger. Safety must be the priority at all times, and it is the priority of all controllers. It is impossible for me to give a particularly detailed reply about the specific time scale that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, but I am happy to examine the matter and write to him in more detail.

To cope with the increasing demands on air space, NATS has developed a two-centre strategy for the United Kingdom. One of the centres will be the new en-route air traffic control centre at Swanwick in Hampshire, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It will take over from the existing centres at West Drayton and Manchester.

The Government share concerns about the delay to Swanwick, but we must all be aware that such delays are not uncommon on projects of this size and complexity. Those concerns were also set out in the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee report on air traffic control, to which we responded on 24 June. As our response made clear, there is no reason to assume that the delay to the new centre will give rise to extra risk to the travelling public.

The London area and terminal control centre at West Drayton can continue to deal safely with traffic demands until Swanwick is operational. However, we recognise that it would be desirable to allay concern over safety. Our response to the Select Committee report confirmed that we will be commissioning an audit of current systems and personnel at West Drayton, and examining again the new systems at Swanwick. I assure the House that current NATS systems are being checked rigorously for year 2000 non-compliance. All non-compliant items should be fixed and tested by the end of December 1998.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked some very specific questions about the priorities—

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) : Will the Minister clarify the Government's exploration of the public-private partnership? Does she believe that it will have any effect on the speed of replacing the Prestwick centre?

Ms Jackson: I was about to touch on precisely the points that the hon. Gentleman raised. They referred specifically to what we perceive as the likely outcome of

[Ms Jackson]

the public-private partnership as far as NATS structure and priorities are concerned. I assure the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington and the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith)—I keep forgetting the name of his constituency, but he smiles, so I trust that he has forgiven me—that legislation will be required before the proposals can be put in place.

We have made it clear that we believe that a public-private partnership is the best way forward for NATS. The actual details, other than the split of shares—51 per cent. to the private sector and 49 per cent. to the Government, with the retention of a golden share—we have already announced publicly. However, the priority will remain safety, regardless of anything else that is inherent in the public-private partnership. We are not yet able to give any other details to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): As the Minister is aware, air traffic control West Drayton is in my constituency. Although safety is a priority, it is related to staff morale. Does she agree that, to maintain that morale, there needs to be closer and continued consultation with the staff of air traffic control West Drayton, particularly via their trade unions, to reassure them about their future employment, conditions of service, the protection of their pensions, and any future development of the public-private partnership?

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. It gives me the opportunity to reassure him and the House that the issues that he has raised, which are especially important for those who have given so much dedicated service to their industry, are of primary concern to the Government. Those issues are being addressed, and my hon. Friend rightly points out that a successful conclusion to any of those matters depends on the closest liaison, co-operation and information being given to all those involved.

I have already referred to our response to the concerns set out in the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee report on air traffic control. Today's *Financial Times* has the headline: "CAA accepts MPs' criticism over Swanwick". Although it is by no means welcome, it is not unusual to have such delays, given the complexities of the systems.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to the incidence of drunken and unruly passengers. One of the most disturbing aspects of people's rising expectations of air travel is that some do not seem to have rising expectations of how to behave. The number of incidents of drunk and disorderly behaviour that have been reported to the CAA as potentially threatening to air safety has risen from 13 in 1993 to 62 in 1997. It should be appreciated that that is a very small proportion of the total number of airline passengers travelling on UK aircraft, which in 1997 was 85 million. Nevertheless, the issue is taken very seriously.

It is an offence for a person to be drunk or to act recklessly or negligently on an aircraft. Offenders face a fine of up to £5,000 or two years in prison, or both. The commander of an aircraft can deny boarding rights to drunken or unruly passengers, or evict them if the need arises—I presume that that is when the aircraft is on the ground. The CAA is working with the airlines to ensure that their staff receive appropriate training to deal with those people.

On the actions of the FAA, to which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred, I am not clear precisely how those could be enforced. The other offences to which he referred were the use of laptops and mobile phones, despite the fact that, on every flight nowadays, passengers are asked to switch them off. I shall certainly pass on his concerns to the CAA.

I have already mentioned the importance of independent investigations carried out by the AAIB, which is recognised internationally for its contribution to air safety. It tries to determine every contributory cause to an accident and any consequent injuries of deaths. It is free to make any recommendation that it wishes arising from its investigations. The majority of its recommendations are addressed to the CAA.

The AAIB is not required to assess the practicability or viability of its proposals, but the CAA must consider the feasibility and viability of such, assess how each would affect overall safety and the best method of implementation. Safety is its priority, and the authority accepts the majority of the recommendations, either in full or in part—more than 80 per cent. between 1990 and 1995.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The hon. Lady is dealing in great detail with many of these issues, and hon. Members will be grateful for that, but does she think that the basic problem of air safety in this country is that we allow too many flights at too frequent intervals, especially in the south-east of England? Is she happy that the White Paper puts the emphasis on Heathrow and Gatwick, which are both in the south-east of England, as the hub of air transport to and from this country? Does she think that it would have been wiser, from all points of view, but especially in respect of safety for passengers and people on the ground, to have said no to more expansion of airports in the south-east?

Ms Jackson: I am somewhat surprised by the hon. Lady's contribution. Given the number of air traffic movements in this country, our record of air safety is second to none, although the Government, people in the aviation industry and the regulators cannot afford to be complacent about it. I was not aware that the White Paper made those assumptions about airports in the south-east. We have made it clear that there will be a daughter document on aviation and airports policy, and we are on the record as saying that we regard the development of regional airports as a vital way to regenerate the regions of the United Kingdom. Although we always take into account main considerations such as protection for the environment and surface access, airports are undoubtedly a regenerative accelerator.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned flight time limitations and automated cockpits. He is right to say that flight time limitations are important in respect of safety and ensuring that air crews are fit to fly aeroplanes and to take care of passengers. Such schemes are designed to ensure that crew are adequately rested between duty periods and do not work long hours that would cause fatigue.

The CAA is responsible for the rules governing such schemes in the United Kingdom. I am confident that the schemes work well. Foreign crews must meet FTL regulations set down by their own authorities, as required under the Chicago convention. In Europe, we have been trying for some time to harmonise schemes to a high standard, but it has proved difficult to reach an agreement that is acceptable to all in the industry. The European Commission is working hard on a solution, and we expect proposals soon.

On automated cockpits, computers and automated systems are being introduced progressively into new aircraft and—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House, without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-eight minutes to Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Thursday 23 July 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

ALLIANCE AND LEICESTER PLC (GROUP REORGANISATION) BILL *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 30 July.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Mortgages (Euros)

1. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What estimate he has made of the number of house buyers likely to switch their mortgages from lenders trading in sterling to those trading in the euro. [50487]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): The United Kingdom mortgage market is already one of the most competitive in Europe. The narrow differential between longer-term interest rates in Britain and in Europe and the need to manage currency exposure are likely to make these specialist products.

Mr. Prentice: I am not entirely sure about that. It seems that, if there is a big gap between interest rates in the sterling zone and those in the euro zone, it would make sense for people entering the mortgage market to go where mortgages are cheap, or cheaper. I have had a letter from one of the big high street banks telling me that it will be offering euro mortgages next year. What is to stop French, German or Dutch banks—banks throughout the European Union—putting advertisements in the national press here to induce people to switch from sterling mortgages to euro mortgages, which may be more beneficial?

Mr. Darling: The answer is that, subject to the regulatory requirements that are enforced in this country, there is nothing to stop any French or German bank or other financial institution from offering mortgages in this country. Indeed, British lenders are already offering mortgages in other member states. That is what the single market is all about.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that 89 per cent. of mortgage finance in the United Kingdom is held at variable rates and given the simple established fact that mortgages account for almost 11 per cent. of average earnings in the UK—by contrast, they account for only 3.5 per cent. of average earnings in the rest of the European Union—will the right hon. Gentleman, in his public information campaign about the single currency, make it abundantly clear to the British people that they will be much more damaged by an increase in interest and mortgage rates under the single currency than they would be if they lived in France, Germany or elsewhere in the EU?

Mr. Darling: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman might have thought long and hard before he asked that supplementary question, because the last time that mortgage rates in this country increased dramatically to double figures was in the late 1980s, following mismanagement by the previous Government. I should have thought also that he would have supported this Government's policy, which is geared to reducing inflation, so that we can bring down interest rates and get long-term stability. The final point that he might want to bear in mind is that interest rates in continental Europe have always been lower than those in this country because it has had the long-term economic stability that this country has not had, primarily because of the stop-go, boom-bust, high-interest-rate policies that were operated by the previous Government.

NHS Funding

2. **Mr. Tony McNulty** (Harrow, East): What representations he has received on proposals in the comprehensive spending review in terms of the funding of the NHS. [50488]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Within a falling debt-to-gross-domestic-product ratio and a current surplus over the next three years, we have made £21 billion available for the NHS, money for modernisation to improve services to patients. To deliver that agenda, responsibility in pay will continue to be necessary but, as a result of our decisions, 30 new hospitals are planned, 1,000 general practitioner surgeries will be renovated, and 7,000 more doctors and 15,000 more nurses will employed in the health service over the next three years. Our proposals have brought a favourable response in the representations that we have received.

Mr. McNulty: I welcome that response and the real increase of 3.7 per cent. over the next three years in NHS funding, compared with 2.5 per cent. under the previous Government. Will the Chancellor confirm that modernisation goes hand in hand with that additional funding? Does he believe that the public will welcome that approach, rather than the approach that involves cutting NHS spending, which is the policy of the Conservative party?

Mr. Brown: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. This is money in return for modernisation. Resources will be available for reform in the NHS. As a result, £8 billion will be invested in new hospitals, clinics and GP premises. It has been possible to raise real-terms health service spending by 5.7 per cent. next year, 4.5 per cent. the year after and 3.9 per cent. the year after that. That is an

average growth of 4.7 per cent. in real terms, far more than was ever achieved by the previous Government. Because of their policies now to cut public spending, the Conservatives will have to tell us which hospitals and which schools they would close.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Increases in NHS spending have frequently required calls on the reserve. Does the Chancellor think that it was prudent to announce a reserve that is smaller than any reserve announced by the six predecessors in his post?

Mr. Brown: The whole point of three-year plans is that Departments now make their decisions within the resources allocated to them. I would have thought that, as a result of seeing the stop-go in public spending under the previous Government, the hon. Gentleman would prefer three-year plans that will allow us to break from the short-termism of the annual cycle and to plan the proper delivery of services. The Conservative party has some questions to answer about its future policies.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): What proportion of the increased expenditure on the NHS capital programmes comes from the private finance initiative? What will be the real cost to the NHS in the longer term of repaying private finance both in terms of the funding of each district health authority and each hospital and in terms of democratic control of the NHS which, in my view, might be handed over in part to the private sector through the PFI?

Mr. Brown: The difference between the private finance initiative under this Government and what happened under the previous Government is that, under the previous Government, public investment was replaced by private investment and, under our Government, public investment is being enhanced by private investment. That has made possible the 30 new hospitals that are being planned—work is already under way on eight. Private finance initiative schemes will produce the new hospitals and they will be very much part of the £8 billion invested in new hospitals and clinics. As a result of the changes that we have made, from a failed PFI unit in the Treasury when we took office to a new and reinvigorated public-private partnership unit in the Treasury now, we are determined to achieve the value for money that I should have thought was wanted by both sides of the House.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the Chancellor explain why he seems so determined to leave the NHS totally unprotected and uninsured against the possibility of high inflation? Does he not realise that high inflation could have a damaging effect on the NHS? Why can he not simply say that he will use the higher tax revenues that will come with higher inflation to give a cast-iron guarantee to the House that he will maintain the spending on the NHS announced in his review in real terms?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman speaks as if we are not increasing NHS expenditure in real terms. It is being increased by 4.7 per cent. a year in real terms. The whole purpose of a three-year settlement is that, within the health budget, with the total increase of £21 billion, all the decisions about the use of resources can be made. It ill becomes the Liberal Democrats, who were suggesting that we should spend an extra half a billion a year on health—that is £1.5 billion over the next three years—when we have now allocated £21 billion, to start complaining about a Labour Government who have delivered when they can never deliver. It is a party that wants publicity without responsibility. That is all that it is.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): I listened to my right hon. Friend talking about the party that seeks publicity without responsibility, Has my right hon. Friend listened to the pledges and commitments of the Scottish National party in previous weeks and months? I notice that not one of them is here—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must ask a question about Government policy and not about other parties in the House.

Mr. Murphy: Has my right hon. Friend had time since the announcement of the spending review to investigate how his announcement compares with the pledges of other parties? Is he aware that the investment in Scotland's health service that is threatened by the SNP and its policies would mean 3,000 fewer nurses, 300 fewer doctors, 400 fewer intensive care beds and 4,000 fewer beds in our hospitals? Is it not true that, under the SNP, we would have cuts, cuts, and cuts again?

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat and it will be some time before I call him again.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): How can the Chancellor be so sure that his spending plans are securely based when independent survey after survey—Ernst and Young on Monday, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research this morning—all conclude that he is seriously over-estimating economic growth and tax receipts? Are all those reports wrong, or is it the type of self-opinionated arrogance that has driven prudence away?

Mr. Brown: Labour Members will not take lectures on arrogance from the hon. Gentleman. I urge him to read the NIESR report that he mentioned. It states:

"Despite our different assessment of future receipts, our forecast shows the Government's fiscal plans being broadly met."

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take note of that, and of what major economists and others have said about our plans.

Richard Jeffrey, chief economist at Charterhouse, said:

"This is an incredibly conservative package that . . . wasn't imaginable from an old Labour"

Chancellor.

Andrew Dilnot, of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said:

"The rate of growth of spending is going to be slower than under the last Government".

[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Yes—and Conservative Members accuse us of imprudence.

Adair Turner said:

"A reasonable combination of tight control of current spending and a welcome increase in capital expenditure."

Conservative Members had better now make up their minds. Last Tuesday, when I made my announcement, they said that they wanted to cut spending. Every day after that, with each of our announcements, they have been anxious to increase spending. They must make up their mind whether they will be a serious party of opposition, or simply in opposition for years to come.

EU Budget Lines

3. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): What recent discussions he has had regarding the European Court's decision that certain EU budget lines had no legal basis. [50489]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I had very fruitful discussions with other European Budget Ministers, and with representatives of the European Commission and European Parliament, at the Budget Council on 17 July. I am pleased to say that, in line with the assurances given by the Prime Minister on 18 June to Members of the European Parliament, we have reached an agreement that will enable funding to be released while ensuring that the European Court of Justice's ruling is respected.

Barbara Follett: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, and for the work that she has been doing to resolve that very difficult situation. When does she estimate that the funding will be released?

Mrs. Liddell: The block that was put on budget lines because of the European Court of Justice's decision has now been lifted, and we anticipate that those budget lines will now be fully operational.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Much as the European Court and the European Commission play a beneficial role in extending the single market in the European Union, will the Minister have a close look at the decision on the Air France subsidy, whereby the Commission appears to have overturned the European Court's judgment? That could affect £2 billion of subsidy to Air France. The Commission's decision seems an outrageous one, and may well have budgetary implications for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to consider.

Mrs. Liddell: The Council of Ministers keeps a very close watch on all the Commission's activities in budgetary matters. We are very committed to tight budget discipline, and that commitment is shared by a number of our European partners. I very much take on board the hon. Gentleman's point.

Coral Reef Products

4. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will make a statement on Customs and Excise policy in relation to the illegal importation of coral reef products. [50490]

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): As in the case of all items protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, customs policy is to confiscate coral imported illegally. Customs usually would prosecute if there were evidence of the importer deliberately breaking the law by such activity.

Mr. Dalyell: Acknowledging the excellent efforts of many customs officers, often in trying circumstances, and in the light of the Adjournment debate on 1 July, may I ask what efforts the Government are making to increase awareness of the impact of the coral trade on coral ecosystems, not only in the United Kingdom but in holiday destinations, where tourists often buy illegally got coral?

Mr. Robinson: My hon. Friend is quite correct to say that there is an amount of unintentional importation occurring, and we are taking action—in a public advertising campaign at airports and other points of embarkation and debarkation—to clarify the matter. I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate him on his Adjournment debate and on drawing attention the matter. I have also read with great interest the recent "Reefs at Risk" report, which he will have seen. Moreover, we are in close contact with the World Wide Fund for Nature and other organisations on the matter.

Public Spending

5. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): If he will make a statement on the priorities for public spending set out in the comprehensive spending review. [50491]

18. **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): If he will make a statement on his priorities for public spending for 1999–2000. [50505]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The statement on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–94 and the White Paper on spending set out prudent spending plans which will achieve a falling debt-to-GDP ratio and a current surplus over the next three years and will invest in reform of the public services and reallocate 50 per cent. of new money to two priority areas—the national health service and education. We shall invest £19 billion in education. We shall renovate or build 2,000 classrooms and employ 6,000 extra teachers to cut class sizes, and we shall have half a million more students in higher and further education.

Mr. Smith: We on the Government Benches welcome the emphasis in my right hon. Friend's comprehensive spending review on capital spending, especially on the doubling of capital investment in our schools, which will be music to the ears of the mums and dads in the Vale of Glamorgan whose children's education had suffered for so long under the Tories. Is not the only way to get the high-quality public services that the public clearly want through increased investment, something that the Conservative party totally opposes?

Mr. Brown: Capital expenditure on schools will double in this Parliament, to the benefit of thousands of school pupils. Also, 6,000 schools are already benefiting from the new deal for schools, which was paid for by the windfall levy on the privatised utilities—something that

was also opposed by the Conservatives. We have made our investment in education; it is now time to hear the policies of the other parties.

Mr. Dobbin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the serious under-investment by the previous Government prevented the modernisation and improvement of the British infrastructure? Will he outline what levels of investment will be going into the public sector when we set up the investing in Britain fund?

Mr. Brown: All hon. Members will welcome the improvements that will be made in their constituencies as a result of the investing in Britain fund. It will double capital investment over the next three years from 0.8 to 1.5 per cent. of GDP. At the moment, 1 million school pupils are being taught in classrooms built before the first world war; two thirds of our hospital blocks are hand-me-downs from the days of the voluntary and charity hospitals; and everyone knows that our roads and the transport infrastructure have been under-maintained. As a result of the investing in Britain fund, I should like to see signs in every constituency that the Government have invested in this country's future.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Does the Chancellor recall that, under each of the previous five Labour Governments that this country has had to endure, unemployment has always been significantly higher when they left office than when they assumed it? Has he noted the report by Ernst and Young—the largest accountancy firm in the world—which states that his comprehensive spending review is going to send unemployment soaring towards 2 million?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should read the report. The first thing of which I remind him is that unemployment increased by 50 per cent. under the previous Government. Secondly, the Labour Government have created 400,000 jobs in their first year. Thirdly, the new deal for young people, which the hon. Gentleman's party also opposed, has already involved 60,000 young people. We are determined to end the problems of youth and long-term unemployment. It is about time that we heard a Conservative party policy that would cut unemployment instead of increasing it.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Does the Chancellor accept that next year will be the last in which Conservative expenditure totals apply, and that, after that, expenditure as a proportion of GDP will be out of control, in the sense that he does not have the foggiest idea what the GDP will be beyond that, given that he himself has produced two totally different central forecasts for GDP in the past four months?

Mr. Brown: First, the forecasts that we have put before the House of Commons have been absolutely consistent since the November statement and the Budget, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reconsider the point that he made on that. Secondly, in respect of prudence in public spending, our golden rule means that, over the cycle, revenues will pay for current spending. In other words, the Budget will be in balance. Under the Conservative Government and in the last economic cycle, there was a deficit of 1.5 per cent. of GDP, averaging £12 billion every year on current spending. So I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider who was prudent and who was imprudent.

As for our spending plans, the Conservative party had better wake up to the fact that we are getting the debt-GDP ratio, which we inherited at 45 per cent., down to 40 per cent. and below. Therefore, we are running a prudent policy—*[Interruption.]* I am not going to take lectures from the party that doubled the national debt and left us with public borrowing at £23 billion, which we had to reduce to £8 billion, and debt interest payments that were more than the budget for education. That is the record of the Conservative Government.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Is my right hon. Friend aware that his comprehensive spending review statement was the defining moment for the Government? It reminded the British people why they voted Labour last year. My right hon. Friend has identified the productivity gap as crucial to the success of his economic and financial policy. In view of the overvalued pound and earnings rising at 5.4 per cent., will he now ensure that the Government devote sufficient resources to deal with the problem?

Mr. Brown: I understand the concerns of exporters about the pound, but, more than anything else, they are concerned about the possibility that we shall return to the policies of the previous Government. We are engaged in a process of moving the economy from the stop-go, low productivity and instability of the past 20 years under the Conservatives to an economy that is capable of sustained and steady growth with high investment and productivity. I believe that most businesses and industrialists do not want a return to the boom-bust years of the Conservatives, and we shall not be diverted from a policy for long-term growth in the economy.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Why did the Chancellor abandon the commitment made in his March Budget statement to balance the Budget in cash terms by 2000?

Mr. Brown: No commitment was made. We said that we would publish three scenarios about the future growth of public expenditure, all of which would meet the golden rule. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at what I have said in past years, he will see that I said two things: it is prudent in economic policy first to meet the golden rule and secondly to have a sustainable debt-GDP ratio. When we published the projections in March, they included, under the old public sector borrowing requirement, zero in one year. In the projections that we published in June, under the net borrowing requirement, we reached zero in one year.

However, the whole purpose of our policy is not to pursue the balanced budget policy that the right hon. Gentleman's party pursued but always failed to meet, but to pursue two rules in public expenditure: the golden rule and the sustainable investment rule with debt to GDP being at a prudent ratio. I must now ask the right hon. Gentleman, who said a week ago that he would cut spending, now that every other Opposition spokesman is saying that they would raise spending, whether his policy is now to cut spending, raise spending or leave it the same. Will he tell us the answer?

Mr. Maude: The Chancellor's defence to the charge that he has abandoned his commitment is that he has

changed the definition. It is almost the same explanation that the Paymaster General gave for his failure to disclose his interests—that he signed false accounts instead. Will the Chancellor now correct the Prime Minister's gravely misleading statement yesterday and accept that his own forecasts are now much more optimistic than any others?

My hon. Friends have quoted the Item Club report and the report by NIESR. The Item Club says:

"the fiscal arithmetic is dangerously prone to recessionary shocks which hit welfare spending and tax revenues."

The NIESR report says:

"The sharp rise in Government spending will keep interest rates higher than would otherwise have been the case and delays their eventual reduction."

What does manufacturing industry have to say about that? Has not the Chancellor shown in a few short weeks what a sham his reputation for prudence and caution was? Has he not blown it all in a calculated bid to wrest control of the Labour party from his neighbour, trying to spend his way into the Labour party succession?

Mr. Brown: The shadow Chancellor has no reputation to worry about. The average of Treasury and independent growth forecasts is 2.2 per cent. We have said that growth will be within a range of 2 to 2.5 per cent. Far from being out of line with independent and City forecasts, we are in line with them.

The shadow Chancellor quoted from the NIESR review. Let me tell him what it says instead of him pretending what it does not say. On page 6 it says:

"the inflation outlook remains benign"

On the same page, it says:

"We expect . . . growth at 2 per cent. this year and 1¼ per cent. next year".

Further on, it says:

"our forecast shows the government's fiscal plans being broadly met."

I expect the Conservatives to read that before trying to give selective quotations from City and independent forecasters.

Our forecasts for the economy last July, last November and in the Budget are broadly being met. It is time that the Conservatives faced the challenge of moving the economy from stop-go, which we had under them, to stable and sustained growth. That is why we made the Bank of England independent. Would the right hon. Gentleman keep the Bank of England independent?

Pay Rises

6. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What assessment he has made of the effects of the current level of pay rises among senior business executives. [50492]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): Pay in all sectors and at all levels must be related to what is affordable in the medium term. Senior business executives are no exception. It would be the worst of short-termism for senior executives or anyone else to pay themselves unsustainable pay increases today at the cost of higher interest rates, fewer jobs and slower growth tomorrow.

Mrs. Campbell: Does my right hon. Friend agree that large pay increases that are not related to productivity can only make firms less competitive and lead to inflationary pressures in the economy?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Boardroom members who are telling others to pull in their belts and accept reasonable and affordable pay increases must show a lead. Our productivity record is not very good compared with other countries. Management has a role to play. I repeat that for anyone—senior executive or not—to pay themselves unsustainable pay increases today would bring the worst possible results, with fewer jobs and slower growth. Everybody—boardrooms in particular—should take the lead on that.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does the Chief Secretary agree that the issue is not the amount that chief executives are paid, but their calibre and the performance of their companies, particularly their investment in infrastructure and the fact that consumers' bills since privatisation have been held at incredibly low levels? We all remember the times when nine out of 10 public telephones did not work and every high street in the country was being dug up by a different utility. The utilities are very different today. We need world-class companies such as British Telecom and other privatised utility companies.

Mr. Darling: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman has been for the past few years. Many hon. Members can name many high streets that are still being dug up by the utilities. I am not sure when he last received a water bill, but many people's water bills have increased substantially.

The important point is that all boardrooms, particularly those of the monopoly utilities, should show an example—some restraint. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that calibre of boardroom members matters. Those of calibre should reflect on the fact that what they do is seen not only by those who work for them but by everyone else. I would have thought that it would be an example of calibre to show some degree of restraint in order to ensure that pay increases are affordable and that some of this year's increases, which, frankly, are very difficult to justify, are not repeated.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that expecting bosses, especially of the public utilities, to adopt the moral tone that the Government might encourage, and asking them to occupy high moral ground on their own pay, is not likely to work? They have never been prepared to respond in the past. As the Government have something to do with regulators and can propose public utility price levels, should they not take the opportunity to work in that direction? Should not the people whom the Government appoint to quangos—I do not like quangos, but the Government do, and they appoint thousands of people to them every year—impose conditions on bosses' pay? If we go down that road—it is public intervention for sure—we might get a better result than by merely preaching.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, particularly in respect of directors of monopoly utilities, who make their profits, to a large extent, because of their monopoly. He will know that the Government are considering action to ensure some degree of restraint in those boardrooms. I repeat that it is up to everyone, particularly senior executives, to show some responsibility and to set an overall example.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Chief Secretary comment on the future of pay review bodies

apropos public sector pay increases? Does he share my view that it is more appropriate for consultants, doctors and nurses to receive a larger increase than public sector executives?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Lady will know that pay review bodies, some of which were set up more than 20 years ago, will remain. We have enhanced their responsibilities by asking them to have regard not only to recruitment, retention and motivation but, crucially, to affordability in order to ensure that whatever they award is consistent with Departments' obligations to achieve the targets set out in last week's review.

Pay review bodies must also have regard to the Government's inflation target. Although such bodies are of course independent and will come to their independent views, most people realise that, if we start to pay ourselves unjustifiable and unaffordable awards, we shall embark on the spiral that we saw far too often in the past, in which any gains from a pay increase that public service workers and others received were swiftly eaten away by inflation. We shall not return to those days.

Economic and Monetary Union

7. **Mr. Brian White** (Milton Keynes, North-East): What progress has been made towards meeting the criteria which the Government have set for joining EMU. [50493]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The Government are committed to a programme that is in the national economic interest and will help to satisfy the five tests outlined by the Chancellor in his statement in October.

The Government are achieving macro-economic stability through our sound fiscal and monetary policies. We are creating the right framework for low inflation through our reform of the Bank of England and our commitment to monitoring the inflation target in the light of the European central bank's practices. We are ensuring that fiscal rules and deficit reduction plans continue to be consistent with the terms of the stability and growth pact, thereby underlining our commitment to avoid excessive deficit. We are promoting greater flexibility in the United Kingdom by our welfare-to-work programme and our investment in long-term skills.

Mr. White: Given that, in 14 months, the Government have done more to prepare British business for either the threat or the opportunity—depending on one's point of view—of the euro than the previous Administration in the long years since Maastricht, will my hon. Friend explain how she intends to provide the House and the British people with regular progress updates, so that any decision on British entry to the euro can be an informed choice rather than the knee-jerk reaction so typified by Conservative Members?

Mrs. Liddell: The Government regularly publish details of the performance of the economy against which the five economic tests can be measured. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We have only five months until the introduction of the single currency in 11 countries with which businesses in this country trade. It is quite appalling that the previous Government did nothing to ensure that preparations were in place. Indeed, their actions could have adversely affected the competitiveness of British industry. This Government are doing everything in our power to address that.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): In the light of the job losses announced by Rover today, does the Economic Secretary not recognise that the overvalued pound is causing serious damage to British manufacturing and threatens tens of thousands of jobs, and that that has been brought about partly by the Government's failure in their fiscal policy to tackle consumers rather than businesses, so forcing up interest rates and the pound? Does she not recognise that the Government have the power and the duty to address that problem, and also to ensure that business has a clearly identifiable timetable for membership of European monetary union so that it can make plans now, knowing that the British exchange rate will be at a competitive level, which at the moment it is not?

Mrs. Liddell: Again, we have publicity without responsibility. The hon. Gentleman is advocating short-term solutions to problems that have to be dealt with in the longer term. It is ironic that that should come from the Liberal Democrats, who voted against all the tax changes introduced by the Government. The sensible thing to do is to get the economy on to the path of long-term sustainable growth. In that way, we benefit the entire British economy, and allow the British people to make a reasoned judgment on whether to join a single currency.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): My hon. Friend will be aware that in the west midlands we are very concerned about the job losses—up to about 10,000—which will arise as a result of Rover's announcement. Will she and her colleagues tell the Monetary Policy Committee that it is important not to exaggerate the inflationary pressures in the economy and that, with the exception of fat cat pay rises, pay settlements, including those at Rover, have been in line with inflation? Higher earnings have largely been the result of factors such as increased overtime working, which, ironically, has come about because employers are unwilling to take on new staff because of the high and uncompetitive rate of the pound. Will the Minister also tell the Monetary Policy Committee that tomorrow's mortgage interest rate rise will lead to demands for higher pay increases? The sooner we can get interest rates down, the better.

Mrs. Liddell: I must tell my hon. Friend that only last month Rover announced 1,000 additional new jobs in connection with the R40 model that it is introducing. One of the key elements for long-term business planning in this country is to get inflation down and stability into the economy. Some 400,000 new jobs have been created over the past year, and to enable us to build a sustainable economy we need the kind of decisions now being taken by the Monetary Policy Committee, which should have been taken by the Conservative Government. Much of the increase in the value of sterling—two thirds of it, in fact—took place in the lifetime of the previous Government. Conservative Members frequently try to forget that.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): As the Government have decided in principle to join the single European currency, and it is now just a matter of timing, does the hon. Lady agree with the National Institute of Economic and Social Research report that came out this morning, which says that the recently announced public spending increases will lead to an interest rate regime that is higher for longer than would otherwise have been the case, and that joining the single European currency in the next Parliament would lead us to join at an uncompetitive rate? According to the report, that will mean

"a period of very slow growth and price deflation".

Is that what the hon. Lady wants to condemn the British economy to, just so that the Government can regain some influence in the European Union?

Mrs. Liddell: The right hon. Gentleman is obsessed with the European Union. Indeed, it was interesting that in the debate on the single currency the other evening, the shadow Chancellor, in response to a question by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary about whether he could tell the House under what circumstances a Conservative Government would ever join the single currency, replied:

"At the moment I cannot".—[*Official Report*, 21 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 990.]

First it was going to be 10 years, and now the Conservatives cannot say when they would ever join. That means that, even if it were in Britain's national interests, the Conservative party could never, because of its own divisions, say that Britain would join a single currency.

I commend to the right hon. Gentleman page 6 of the NIESR report that he cited, which states explicitly:

"the inflation outlook remains benign",

and that the forecast shows

"inflation falling below 2½ per cent. per annum by the end of this year, with a modest revival to the target rate in 1999".

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

8. **Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): How many representations he has received since 1 May 1997 about the debt problems of the poorest countries in the world. [50494]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Since 1 May 1997, the Treasury has received more than 9,000 letters and postcards about third-world debt. In the past year, eight of the poorest indebted countries have moved into the debt reduction process.

Mr. Canavan: Although some progress was made at the G8 summit in May, is my right hon. Friend aware of the disappointment at the failure of some of our G8 partners to agree on more positive measures for debt relief? As the International Development Committee report on debt relief was published more than 11 weeks ago, can we expect an early positive response to the Committee's excellent recommendations? Will my right hon. Friend assure us that the Government will step up their efforts to write off the unpayable debts of the world's poorest countries by 2000?

Mr. Brown: I assure my hon. Friend that a response has been sent to the Select Committee, outlining a number of initiatives in which the Government are engaged. As a result of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, Uganda became the first country to receive a debt reduction—it will complete the process this month—by $347 million. Another five countries will have their debt reduced by $3 billion as a result of the negotiations and of the decision points that have been reached. Another two countries are about the reach the decision point, and we are close to agreement on six other countries.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. By the millennium, as a result of the Mauritius mandate, on which Government policy is based, we want all countries to become part of the debt reduction process. That will go hand in hand with the commitment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to increase overseas aid and the proportion of our national income that is given in overseas aid.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): What discussions is the right hon. Gentleman having with other European Union financial leaders about how substantial progress can be made towards ensuring that the whole of the EU helps to reduce the debt burden of the poorest countries?

Mr. Brown: Much as many hon. Members want the European Union to work in an integrated way on all issues of foreign policy, debt relief works through the Paris club and through pressure in the G7 and other organisations. I think that what the hon. Gentleman wants is what we are trying to do—to persuade our G7 partners to become far more fully involved in the debt reduction process and to persuade countries to reconsider their refusal to sell International Monetary Fund gold. Through our new initiative for post-conflict countries such as Rwanda—which have been burdened not only by huge, unsustainable debts but because they are recovering from war—we can do more as members of the international community to extend the debt reduction process.

A year ago, when we came to power, only one country had finished the decision-making process on debt relief. As a result of international efforts, eight countries have finished that process and another six will soon be at the point of reaching a decision. We must also move forward with the post-conflict countries. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are not complacent about these matters; we shall try to move other countries that have hitherto done less.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend redouble his efforts to solve some of the debt problems of the poorest countries? I, like many hon. Members, receive many representations from schoolchildren, who absolutely cannot understand why we cannot do something about the terrible pictures that we see on the television. I welcome the progress that has been made, but will he redouble his efforts, so that, when we go to schools, we can talk about the real progress that we are making?

Mr. Brown: The Government want poverty to be halved in the future. I assure my hon. Friend that our efforts are designed to ensure that international development aid money goes to the reduction of poverty, to health programmes and to education. We want to avoid

what happened in the 1980s, when much borrowed money financed prestige projects, was wasted on military expenditure and, in some cases, led to the corrupt use of resources.

As we move forward, countries such as Mozambique—where 9 per cent. of the national income was being spent on debt relief but only 4 per cent. was being spent on education and health—are now part of the debt reduction process, which enables money to be spent on the education of children and the health of all people. That is the aim of the Government. I hope that, in the run-up to the millennium, our international millennium initiative will be to ensure that every country is part of the debt reduction process.

EU Spending

9. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on the impact of the proposals set out in his comprehensive spending review on the United Kingdom's net contributions to the European Union.

Mrs. Liddell: The United Kingdom's contributions to the European Community derive from its treaty obligations with the Community. Consequently, the comprehensive spending review has had no direct impact on the United Kingdom's net contributions to the European Community.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I thank the hon. Lady for her reply. If that is so, can she assure the House that when the budget and expenditure review of the EU takes effect from the end of next year, the UK's net contributions to the EU in the first two years of the new millennium will be no higher than they are at present?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that discussions are about to start on the new financial prospectus for the European Community. It is important to make the point that, at the moment, there are increased pressures on the European Community budget because of decisions entered into by the Government of which he was a member in 1992 in relation to structural funds, which have meant a significant increase in expenditure on contributions to the EU. The long-term financial prospects must be looked at in light of the proposed enlargement of the EU. It is the determination of the Government to ensure that we can have a tight budgetary package so we get value for money not just for our domestic economy, but right across Europe.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my hon. Friend agree that targeted investment-led structural funds have made a major impact on the economies of regions such as the north-west, particularly during those years when the Conservative party refused to intervene to do anything about disparities in regional economies? Does she believe that the comprehensive spending review's proposals for new investment in transport infrastructure will help to develop the economies of our regions so that we may strive to become near the average of the EU regions in terms of gross domestic product, rather than below, where we find ourselves as a result of 18 years of neglect?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend is well aware of the Chancellor's intention in the comprehensive spending review to seek to reach a settlement that ensures that our infrastructure gets the investment that it requires. We are coming up to a period in which we will be examining the future of the structural funds. The aim of the British Government will be to ensure value for money and that the new structural funds settlement and the common agricultural policy secure the best interests of the taxpayers of the United Kingdom and our constituents.

European Investment Bank

10. **Mr. Colin Breed** (South-East Cornwall): What steps Her Majesty's Government are taking to ensure that the European investment bank properly assesses applications for investment. [50496]

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): All projects approved by the EIB are approved by its board after appraisal by its staff.

Mr. Breed: Is the Minister aware that the Select Committee on European Legislation was recently advised of a substantial write-off of an advance to a regional airline which subsequently failed, and that the reasons given were

"Poor financial and commercial management, an inadequate choice of aircraft—

which seems to bear out the former—

"and lack of political support"

from the Government of the region? Does he agree that those assessments should have been part of the original appraisal and that, therefore—in terms of getting EIB loans—such matters should be eliminated? Will he institute a review of the way in which EIB loans are assessed so that we can minimise any future bad debts?

Mr. Robinson: I have met Sir Brian Unwin, and I will bring the matter to his attention. I would not like to leave the House with the impression that the EIB is an inactive or incompetent organisation. It has invested £26 billion, £23 billion of which was in the EU, and, last year, £3.8 billion—the highest level ever—was invested in the UK. I will bring the matters to the attention of Sir Brian. I have met him before and will do so again, and I will report what he says back to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Is my hon. Friend aware that if the Chancellor of the Exchequer were to announce that he was in favour of joining EMU—without setting a date—the consequences would be an increase in inward investment, a reduction in the high level of the pound and a reduction in interest rates? Would that not be one those rarest-of-all economic consequences—a genuinely free economic lunch?

Mr. Robinson: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear the five conditions that must be met and has said that, if it is in the national interest, there is no barrier

to our joining EMU. The performance of the European investment bank in the United Kingdom and the European Union is already extremely good and should be welcomed by the whole House.

Tax Harmonisation

11. **Mr. John Cryer** (Hornchurch): When he last met his counterparts in the European Union to discuss tax harmonisation. [50497]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Government's view is that direct taxation is primarily a matter for national Governments. Decisions on European tax issues are subject to unanimity.

Mr. Cryer: As we know, there have been extensive discussions within the auspices of the Economic and Finance Council on future tax harmonisation. Can my right hon. Friend guarantee that there will be no future discussions on income tax harmonisation within the European Union because, as sure as eggs is eggs, that is what enthusiasts for EMU will press for next?

Mr. Darling: It is not true to say that there have been extensive discussions. ECOFIN has discussed measures to cut down on tax evasion and also the effects of harmful tax competition—a matter that has been pursued by this Government—as some countries are offering tax incentives in particular areas rather than a generalised reduced rate of corporation tax. I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend said in the debate on the European Union the other night and I understand his general position on it—let alone the European currency. I believe that his fears are exaggerated and I do not share the basis on which he opposes the concept of monetary union or the European Union itself.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): With the London art market already largely destroyed in the pointless quest for tax harmonisation, does the Chief Secretary accept that the Commission's proposal to impose a 20 per cent. withholding tax on interest income poses a real threat to London's position as an international financial centre and will lead to investors simply switching their money to Zurich or New York? Will he give a categorical assurance that the Government will veto that proposal and reject any compromise that damages the City of London?

Mr. Darling: I was wondering what the hon. Gentleman was doing on the Front Bench, but I am reminded that he is now an Opposition Treasury spokesman and I welcome him to that job. I recently met an individual who is involved in the art world and am aware of the fears. Frankly, we were sticking up for the position of the art market long before the hon. Gentleman showed any interest in the matter. The Government are aware of the problem—and to say that the London art market is under threat is to raise unjustified fears, as it is competitive and well regarded throughout the world.

European Currencies (Exchange Costs)

12. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): What estimate he has made of the annual costs to the United Kingdom general public of exchange costs related to European currencies. [50498]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): Any estimate of annual exchange costs related to European currencies would be subject to wide margins of error. It would need to take account of the transaction costs incurred by business and individuals each time currencies are exchanged and the associated costs to business of exchange rate uncertainty.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Why should the British holidaymaker in Europe spend billions of pounds annually filling the pockets of European money changers, when at the stroke of a pen—entry into the single European currency—those costs would disappear overnight? Is that not a powerful argument for early entry into the European single currency?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor made the Government's position on the single currency absolutely clear. If we meet the five economic tests, we believe that, in principle, the single currency would be good for this country. In the past six months of our presidency, we have done everything that we can to ensure that it is launched successfully. I understand my hon. Friend's point, but I think he would agree that the important thing is to ensure that this country prepares so that it is in a position to make a genuine and real decision whether to join such a currency at the appropriate time.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Surely the costs of conversion of currencies are as nothing to the costs to our people of having to endure inappropriate levels of interest or quantities of money in circulation, imposed by an alien bank over which they have no democratic control.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman illustrates the problems of the Conservative party when he describes the European Union as alien. No doubt he was greatly encouraged the other night when the shadow Chancellor moved his party's position from not joining a single currency for at least 10 years to not being able to envisage ever joining it at all. That is how out of touch Conservative Members are. They must realise that we are part of Europe. More than 50 per cent. of our trade is within Europe, and we believe that, if it is in our economic interest to join a single currency, that should be equated with the national interest.

The hon. Gentleman graphically illustrates the difference between his party and the Government, who will always act in the national economic interest, which is why most people believe that we will best serve our country's interests in Europe.

Business of the House

3.30 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to announce the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 JULY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Bill.

TUESDAY 28 JULY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill.

Consideration of a Lords amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill *[Lords]*.

Consideration of Lords amendments which are expected to be received to the National Minimum Wage Bill

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 pm.

WEDNESDAY 29 JULY—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, which will include the usual three-hour pre-recess debate.

Opposition Day (19th allotted day). Until about 7 pm, there will be a debate which the Opposition have entitled "The Government's obsession with style over substance", followed by a debate that they have called "The Government's threat to the quality of life in rural areas". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

Motion on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 (Terrorist Organisations) Order.

THURSDAY 30 JULY—Progress on remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Bill.

FRIDAY 31 JULY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Bill.

The House will then rise for the summer recess. I cannot announce this week the business for the first week back, but we will return on Monday 19 October.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for the announcement of next week's business, and of the date on which we can return from working in our constituencies. The House is expecting a number of statements before we rise next week. When can we expect the publication of, and a statement on, the findings of the inquiry into the Sandline affair? Will it be, as rumoured, on Monday?

When will we have the long-awaited statement on local government? Will there be a statement on asylum seekers? When can we expect the outcome of the roads review? Can the Leader of the House confirm that there is no question of delaying announcements so that they are made when the House is not sitting, and can she shed any light on the continuing speculation in the newspapers about the legislation on freedom of information?

If there are to be changes not only in the personnel of the Government—we very much hope that the right hon. Lady will not be moved—but in the structure, can we have early discussions, through the usual channels, about the implications for Select Committees and for question time in the House?

Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate, in which many Ministers may wish to take part, including the right hon. Lady herself, so that the House can judge for itself the claim of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs on 15 July in the *Edinburgh Evening News*:

"When it comes to performance as a minister, I'm rated as one of the best in the House."

Can the right hon. Lady devise an appropriate mechanism to allow the House to vote on the respective qualities of Ministers? Might there also be an opportunity for the President of the Board of Trade to apologise for statements made by the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs about his staff, and to outline what disciplinary action she is taking to deal with him?

Mrs. Taylor: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has made it clear that she has no intention of responding to press reports, and that she has confidence in her Ministers and her civil servants. I have nothing to add to that.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for reiterating what I have said many times about the recess. It is not a time just for holidays, but for hon. Members to do useful and well organised work in our constituencies. It is a working period, which sometimes includes Committees of the House.

The right hon. Gentleman was worried about whether there would be any delay in our making several statements. I hope that there will be statements in one form or another before the House rises on all the matters he raised, but I cannot guarantee that. We pencil in dates for statements, but sometimes they must be adjusted.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Legg report. The inquiry is independent, as I have pointed out before. I have not yet had confirmation of precise arrangements for the report's publication, but I expect it to happen next week, and expect that there will be a statement in the House.

We are still considering the precise timing and arrangements of the local government White Paper. On the roads review, I have said before that I think it extremely important that any announcement allows all hon. Members to be informed on what is happening in their areas. There are precedents for and against statements on such matters, and we shall have to make a judgment about the balance of other business and statements. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about asylum, and I hope that there will be a statement, perhaps on Monday.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): Has my right hon. Friend seen early-day motion 1589 about freedom of information, which has been signed by 76 hon. Members from both sides of the House, including several leading Select Committee chairpersons?

[That this House welcomes the Prime Minister's statement in 1996 that a Freedom of Information Act 'is not some isolated constitutional reform' but 'a change that is absolutely fundamental to how we see politics developing in this country over the next few years'; congratulates the Government on its Freedom of Information White Paper; expresses concern at the prospect of any delay in bringing the measure forward; and calls on the Government to publish its draft Freedom

of Information Bill before the end of the current session and to ensure that the actual Bill is introduced in the coming session.]

Can she give us a statement next week on the progress of the draft Bill on freedom of information? Would it be possible for that statement to deal with Sir Richard Scott's comments after the arms-to-Iraq affair about a culture of secrecy in Whitehall that was endemic to how we operated? He was saying that the affair was not just a matter of a few Tory Ministers behaving badly, but part of the way in which we work. Can we be told when the draft Bill will be published? Can we be assured that it will be in the Queen's Speech?

Mrs. Taylor: My right hon. Friend is too experienced to expect me to anticipate the Queen's Speech. The Government are fully committed to a radical freedom of information Bill. I apologise to the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) for ignoring that part of his question; perhaps I had anticipated that it would come up again. I can confirm that, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has said, we intend to publish a draft Bill in the autumn.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Could the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on the European Union's current anti-dumping negotiations? I draw her attention to early-day motion 1558 and the large number of jobs at stake in many constituencies.

[*That this House supports the British Government in opposing measures taken by the European Commission to impose duties on cotton imports from China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey; recognises the adverse effect this will have on United Kingdom jobs with 7,000 jobs in the United Kingdom textile finishing sector at risk; and calls on the Government to continue its stance in objecting to these measures along with the eight other member states who oppose the duties in order to ensure that these proposals are scrapped.*]

May I ask the right hon. Lady to find time for a statement on the future of mutual building societies, following the very narrow victory today by the Nationwide board in the ballot?

Has she had an opportunity to study the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) to the Secretary of State for Social Security? It draws attention to the continuing difficulties in getting statements and documents from the Government, including this week, which, following the brave words of the Leader of the House in a debate earlier this week, is perhaps somewhat unfortunate?

Finally, early-day motion 1569, supported by more than 80 Members, contains a request that urgent consideration be given to solving the long-standing problem of dealing with private Members' business. Can the right hon. Lady assure the House that action will be taken on that front as well?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are extremely concerned about the anti-dumping issue, as are many of us who have textiles in our constituencies. I know that my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade has been active in trying to get a satisfactory resolution of that matter.

Regarding mutual building societies, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in November last year, we increased the turnout threshold in conversion votes from 20 to 50 per cent. That is probably as far as the Government can go in that respect. I assume that the hon. Gentleman wants time to be found for a debate on the matter, but he will understand why "not next week" is a particularly appropriate answer this week.

Regarding his hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, I have no idea what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Had he given me notice, I would have made inquiries, but I shall do so after Business Questions. I have to admit that I do not see every piece of correspondence from individual Members to all my ministerial colleagues. As for private Members' Bills, the hon. Gentleman is a member of the Modernisation Committee, and he knows that that is one of the issues to which the Committee intends to turn its attention.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Will the Leader of the House give the House an assurance that she will defend the right of the House of Commons over the other place, particularly in respect of the amendment made yesterday in the House of Lords to the Crime and Disorder Bill? Is she aware that it would be utterly intolerable for two free votes of the House of Commons—one on fox hunting and the other on equality of treatment between people of different sexual orientations—to be frustrated by the second Chamber? We have a Government who are prepared to take tough decisions, and here is a really tough decision.

Is my right hon. Friend also aware that a study of the Division list shows that the life peers voted by a majority of 138 to 97 in favour of rejection of the Bill, which includes 20 Labour life peers, four Labour hereditary peers and a former leader of the party, Lord Callaghan? Will she therefore give serious consideration to the apparent policy of the Government that patronage is better than election when it comes to a second Chamber? Will she look at the Parliamentary Reform Bill introduced last week, which would provide for a wholly elected second Chamber of the sort that most civilised countries adopted long ago?

Mrs. Taylor: I am afraid that I cannot hold out very much hope for the Parliamentary Reform Bill introduced last week, but my right hon. Friend makes some serious points about the need for reform of the other place. On his two specific points, I think that the fate of the Bill on fox hunting had more to do with Opposition Members than with Members of the House of Lords; and, after the vote last night, I am considering very seriously with my right hon. Friends, including the Home Secretary, the options now open to us.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we have an early debate on the extraordinary events in the Department of Trade and Industry, not least the astonishing outburst by the Under-Secretary of State to which my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) referred? Does the right hon. Lady not agree that we really must get to the bottom of those events, touching as they do on the relationship between the Secretary of State, one of her junior Ministers and the permanent secretary, the ability of that Department properly to discharge its duties, and its relationship with the House? Surely the President of the Council must agree that this matter is of the utmost

[Mr. Eric Forth]

gravity and urgency. Will she arrange for an emergency debate to take place later today so that we can clarify those matters before the events of the coming weekend?

Mrs. Taylor: I am reminded that the Opposition will have a debate on style over substance next Wednesday. The right hon. Gentleman may have style on occasion, but there was certainly no substance in that request.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Although I deeply regret the decision by the House of Lords yesterday, I ask my right hon. Friend to bear it in mind that there are differences of opinion about the way in which a second Chamber should be organised. Is she aware that many hon. Members, including myself, take the view that the last thing that the House of Commons should want is an elected second Chamber that would substantially undermine the authority of this House, which is already undermined to some extent by organisations such as the European Union? If an elected second Chamber did as the other place did yesterday, what political and moral grounds would we have for opposing it? Now, we can oppose the second Chamber with justification on decisions such as the one made last night, because the other place is totally unelected.

Mrs. Taylor: That is very interesting, but I am afraid that I cannot find time for a debate on that matter next week.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Is the right hon. Lady aware of the crisis in the milk industry? Does she know that a week ago all the major dairies in this country refused to bid for this round of milk sales, with the result that some 40 per cent. of dairy farmers do not have an outlet at any price for their milk in the coming months?

Will the right hon. Lady try to arrange an emergency debate or at least a statement by the Minister of Agriculture about what can be done? A statement could perhaps be made by the President of the Board of Trade, because the Monopolies and Mergers Commission is currently considering the matter. I hope that the right hon. Lady understands that the dairy farmers of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are very worried about what will happen to their milk.

Mrs. Taylor: I cannot arrange the debate that the hon. Gentleman requests, but I remind him that Agriculture questions will take place on Thursday.

Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe (Leigh): Will my right hon. Friend consider arranging a debate on the textile industry? Has she read early-day motion 1558, in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle)? The motion pinpoints the potential loss of 7,000 British textile workers' jobs. Those jobs will be lost simply because the European Commission is not firm enough in importing its levies and protecting the general textile industry. Does my right hon. Friend accept that today's legitimate demonstration to safeguard and secure textile workers' jobs is welcomed by the House?

Mrs. Taylor: As I explained earlier, I represent a textile constituency, so I know about those problems. The Government remain firmly opposed to anti-dumping duties on imports of unbleached cotton originating in China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey. We are doing everything that we can to prevent confirmation of the current provisional duties. There is concern among all Members with textile interests in their constituency. As I pointed out earlier, my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade is fully aware of those concerns, and is working extremely hard to try to achieve a proper resolution of the problem.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Will the Leader of the House give a categorical assurance that during the summer parliamentary recess, no British forces will be committed to action in Kosovo or against Serbia without the House of Commons first being recalled to debate the matter?

Mrs. Taylor: I have said on other occasions that we can never guarantee an oral statement before any decision is made to deploy troops. We would never want to deploy troops without first making a statement, but obviously that cannot be ruled out.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend said that she expected the freedom of information Bill to be published in the autumn. I wonder whether she might go further and arrange for the publication of the draft Bill before the Labour, Liberal and Conservative party conferences, because I believe that it will certainly influence debates at those conferences.

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure when all the dates of those conferences are, but it is an interesting suggestion. I shall look at the possibilities, but without giving any guarantee.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): May I pursue that point? Is the right hon. Lady aware that her answers to the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) are very disappointing indeed? The Bill has slipped several times, and there is now concern that the Government are going cold on the idea.

It is a matter of some importance that we get the draft Bill published in the spillover at the latest, because the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) and the Select Committee on Public Administration are looking forward to conducting pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. That makes it impossible, realistically, to put it in the Queen's Speech for next year. That is a matter of grave concern because, apart from anything else, before the general election some pretty firm assurances were given to my party—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."]—that these matters would be brought forward and dealt with very early in this Parliament.

Mrs. Taylor: Freedom of information has long been a high priority of the Labour party, and, as I said, Government remain fully committed to a freedom of information Bill. I believe that the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), as Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration, which is considering a draft Bill, appreciates the importance of that procedure, which I want to see advanced in a positive way, and from which I want positive outcomes.

The idea is that we have a draft Bill, which is then considered again. I hope that that means that the passage of the legislation will subsequently be more

straightforward. We cannot guarantee that, but it is worth investing time in that pre-legislative procedure to getthe legislation right. Earlier, I gave the date that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster mentioned to the House—in the autumn. He has made that statement, and that remains the position.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I had understood that the Office of Public Service was saying that the draft freedom of information Bill would be ready by the end of September. Is that true?

Mrs. Taylor: I cannot give a precise date, but the end of September is in the autumn.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will we have a chance next week to debate the report that the Government were going to produce on the progress of each Minister? The Leader of the House knows that, in February, I asked a series of questions about the time that it took for people to respond to letters from Members of Parliament. One junior Minister has said that he is being undermined by his civil servants because he is trying to get 90 per cent. of letters answered within the appallingly long time of three working weeks.

What will actually happen? Does the Leader of the House believe that she is responsible for obtaining for the House a proper service for getting those answers out to Members of Parliament? She knows that Ministers refuse to tell me how long it is now taking them to reply to Members' letters, saying that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will publish those figures some time—and not in *Hansard*.

Mrs. Taylor: The information will be published. We shall publish the target times for the turnaround of replies, and information about the volume of correspondence to different Departments. I hope that we shall be able to do so in the very near future.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Why should there be all this fuss and bother about what the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs is alleged to have said? If what was reported today in the House is correct, what is wrong with the Minister doing his own spin doctoring? He has cut out the middle man.

Mrs. Taylor: I think my hon. Friend confirms that we need not have a debate on that subject next week.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. Humorous though some of these exchanges are, I am not prepared to cut into the period of time for debate on the Northern Ireland Bill, which should start at about 4 o'clock, so I am asking for very specific questions and very brief responses, please.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Can the Minister of Transport come to the House and explain how he will safeguard the interests of British aviation against the thoroughly unconstitutional behaviour of Commissioner Kinnock, who, at a stroke of a pen, seems to be able to overturn the jurisdiction of the European Court?

Mrs. Taylor: Again, I do not think that we will be able to debate such issues next week, but the hon. Gentleman, who is well informed on European matters, will know that the original decision to grant aid predated the arrival of Commissioner Kinnock.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Has the Leader of the House had drawn to her attention concerns about thoracic surgical services at Derriford hospital in Plymouth following a Channel 4 news programme last night? Such instances cause deep anxiety to patients and those close to them. As well as leaving no stone unturned, will she offer reassurance that the House will have the chance to debate the findings of any review of the circumstances?

Mrs. Taylor: I cannot give that assurance at this stage, but I will try to make sure that my hon. Friend is fully informed of what is happening and of when any outcome is due. As she knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health acted promptly to launch an inquiry and the surgeon concerned has been suspended, pending its outcome. I do not think that there is time to have a further debate at this stage—nor, probably, would it be appropriate.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Speaking as one of the six co-sponsors of the Back-Bench amendment on the age of consent, may I ask the right hon. Lady to accept that there is cross-party Back-Bench concern about the actions of another place in overturning that amendment? Therefore, does she not consider it reasonable for the Home Secretary to consult both with other parties through the usual channels and with those co-sponsors on the nature of the Government's response next Tuesday night to the decision in another place?

Furthermore, does the right hon. Lady deprecate press briefings, which are rumoured to have taken place, to the effect that the Government might cave in on the issue? Does she agree that those briefings were not helpful in advance of the debate in another place?

Mrs. Taylor: I certainly confirm that such briefings in advance of that debate would not have been helpful at all. I do not think that any briefings were issued by Labour Members; they certainly did not come from Government sources. I have explained that, along with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and other colleagues, we are considering seriously the options open to us now.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will my right hon. Friend try to find time in a busy schedule before the House rises to look at the impact of the Data Protection Act 1988 on the ability of right hon. and hon. Members to take up constituency cases? We should be able to do that, and I am sure that the whole House supports me, without any fear or favour or impediment. More of us have time allotted to take up constituency cases than ever before. The last thing we want is barriers. The Act is not being applied equally throughout the country or by different agencies. I should be grateful if she would protect our interests by looking into the matter.

Mrs. Taylor: I am aware that some Members, when they take up a case on behalf of a constituent, have been asked for proof that the constituent is willing for the Member to do so. I do not think that such proof is

[Mrs. Taylor]

necessary, but I know that some people want doubly to protect themselves. It is an issue that we will have look at, because it appears that that practice is increasing.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Whose decision was it to release the Government's consultation paper on fishing safety and recovery of bodies lost at sea by written answer and press conference, as opposed to Commons statement? The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) and I have received the document in the past few minutes. We understand that the press conference took place at 2.30.

Given the commitment by letter last November to release such a consultation document on recovery of bodies lost at sea to four bereaved families in my constituency, what provision was made to inform them of the release of the document and to ensure that they had its contents at least at the same time as the press? Given the huge sensitivity of these matters, is not this an occasion when effective parliamentary scrutiny and questioning might have been better than the Government's obsession with news management?

Mrs. Taylor: This is a matter of sensitivity and, sometimes in such matters, it is right that everyone can absorb the information before they jump to conclusions about what is being proposed. We do not always have statements in the House. As I was saying the other day, we always have to balance the business of the House with statements and the nature of those statements, but I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's concerns are passed on to my right hon. Friends.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): In considering the options in response to last night's vote in another place on the age of consent, will my right hon. Friend take into consideration the fact that many hon. Members feel strongly that we should at least be given the opportunity for a further vote on the matter?

Mrs. Taylor: That issue will return to the House next Tuesday. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, along with other colleagues as well as myself, understands the feeling in the House on that matter.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Will the right hon. Lady find time for an early debate on redundancy arrangements, given that so many of her colleagues will be deeply interested in them in the next week or so? Does the right hon. Lady agree with the self-assessment of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, her hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), that he is rated one of the best in the House?

Mrs. Taylor: I have nothing to add to what I said earlier.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): May I refer my right hon. Friend to early-day motion 1583 which relates to a Court of Appeal decision earlier this week about genetically modified crop trials?

[*That this House welcomes the Court of Appeal ruling that it was illegal for field trials of genetic maize in Devon to have been allowed without first having met the statutory legal requirements relating to national seed list trials; regrets that the court failed to go on to rule that GM crop trials be removed; recognises that there is now a moral obligation to do so; values the legal requirement that two replicated trials must be conducted before any national field trials can proceed; and calls for a moratorium on all GM field trials until the wider consequences for human health and environmental well-being have been fully explored.*]

Can a statement be made in the House which clarifies exactly what is happening to the crops that have been ruled to be illegal because they have been grown without having first met the statutory legal requirements over national seed list trials? Can we also have a statement on whether there is a case for a moratorium on such GM trials until their status is clear?

Mrs. Taylor: I cannot guarantee my hon. Friend the statement or the debate that he requests. However, I draw his attention to the fact that there are Agriculture questions on Thursday, and it may be possible to raise the subject then.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to the right hon. Lady's glib answers to date, why will she not ask the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South, to make a statement to the House, given that that would enable him either to apologise for, or to explain, his publicly reported attack on the permanent secretary of the Department in which he is a Minister? If the right hon. Lady is not prepared to make that request, are we to conclude that the Minister's behaviour is an example of the high standards of public life to which new Labour aspires?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman's behaviour today certainly does not meet the high standards of the House. There is no case to answer, and to ask for time to be used on such matters is just silliness on the hon. Gentleman's part.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate or statement on the taxation of the North sea offshore oil and gas industry? That matter has a bearing on some 350,000 jobs across the country, and affects hundreds of constituencies throughout the land.

Mrs. Taylor: I am aware of my hon. Friend's concern about this issue. I know that he is one of those who has already found the three-hour pre-recess debate extremely useful. I would not be surprised if he were to try to contribute again. I cannot throw any more light on that topic today, but I know that Ministers are aware of the interest in that issue.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Can the Leader of the House arrange for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham)—or preferably a new Minister—to make a statement on the quarantine regulations? If the right hon. Lady believes that he cannot come next week, when are we likely to have an announcement on any proposed changes in quarantine regulations? The right hon. Lady may know that many people are deferring their holidays in anticipation of changes taking place.

Mrs. Taylor: I am not aware of people deferring their holidays on that basis, and I cannot provide time for a

debate before the summer recess. I remind the hon. Gentleman, as I have reminded others, that it is Agriculture questions on Thursday.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Further to the question on the oil tax, does the right hon. Lady not realise that, for an industry to make investment decisions, it has to know what the Government intend to do with the tax regime? The Government keep promising to say something, but then say nothing. Is the right hon. Lady aware that Labour Members and nationalist Members are fighting over the fact that the Government have made a U-turn, and about who is responsible? The industry cannot have confidence in Back-Bench speculation; it needs to know what the Government are planning to do.

Mrs. Taylor: In that case, we should wait for the Government's decision.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate before the recess on the working time directive, since its implementation has been promised by 1 October? Although that will be widely welcomed, it is extremely controversial, and raises many technical questions about implementation.

Mrs. Taylor: For reasons that the hon. Gentleman will well understand, next week's programme is extremely crowded, and I do not think that there will be time for extra debates of the type that he is suggesting.

Orders of the Day

Northern Ireland Bill

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Further considered in Committee, pursuant to Order [17 July] [Progress, 22 July].

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Clause 23

EXCLUSION OF MINISTERS FROM OFFICE

4.4 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 11, leave out lines 28 and 29 and insert—

'( ) because he is not committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means;

( ) because he is involved in acts of violence or of preparation for violence;

( ) because he is directing, assisting or promoting acts of violence committed or planned by other people;

( ) because he is not committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations and the achievement of the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms, by 22nd May 2000;

( ) because he is not co-operating fully with any Commission of the kind referred to in section 7 of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in the implementation of the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland set out in Command Paper 3883;'.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 82, in page 11, line 29, at end insert 'or'.

No. 83, in page 11, line 31, leave out from 'office' to end of line 32.

No. 200, in page 11, line 32, after 'reason', insert

'(including his association with paramilitary organisations carrying out any form of violence or intimidation, such as so-called punishment beatings)'.

No. 16, in page 11, leave out lines 37 and 38 and insert

'because it is—

( ) not committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means;

( ) involved in acts of violence or of preparation for violence;

( ) directing, assisting or promoting acts of violence committed or planned by other people;

( ) not committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations , and the achievement of the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms, by 22nd May 2000;

( ) not co-operating fully with any Commission of the kind referred to in section 7 of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in the implementation of the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland set out in Command Paper 3883, or'.

No. 86, in page 11, line 38, leave out from 'means' to end of line 39.

[Mr. Michael Lord]

No. 201, in page 11, line 39, after 'reason', insert

'(including its association with paramilitary organisations carrying out any form of violence or intimidation, such as so-called punishment beatings)'.

No. 17, in page 12, leave out lines 17 to 27 and insert—

'(7) The Secretary of State shall serve such a notice if he believes the Minister or party concerned is—

(a) not committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means;

(b) involved in acts of violence or of preparation for violence;

(c) directing, assisting or promoting acts of violence committed or planned by other people;

(d) not committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations and the achievement of the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms, by 22nd May 2000; or

(e) not co-operating fully with any Commission of the kind referred to in section 7 of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in the implementation of the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland set out in Command Paper 3883.'.

No. 121, in page 12, line 18, leave out from 'account' to the end of line 27 and insert 'subsection (1)'.

No. 90, in page 12, line 18, leave out 'or' and insert

'concerned, the organisation to which he or his party is affiliated, or the'.

No. 88, in page 12, leave out lines 24 to 27 and insert—

'(d) has already decommissioned a substantial proportion of its illegally held firearms, ammunition and explosives in accordance with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 and is fulfilling a decommissioning timetable which will ensure that it has completed decommissioning before 22nd May 2000.'.

No. 89, in page 12, line 27, at end insert—

'(e) has commenced the dismantling of its paramilitary structure;

(f) in the opinion of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary no longer represents a threat to the community.'.

No. 75, in clause 15, page 8, line 35, at end insert—

'(11A) A member shall be excluded from office if he is unable to satisfy the Assembly that he is committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means.

(11B) A Northern Ireland Minister shall not take up office until a resolution, "*That the member be accepted as a Minister*" has been approved by the Assembly voting on a cross-community basis in accordance with section 4(5).

(11C) The Assembly shall make its determination under this section based solely on the factors listed on section 23(7).'.

Mr. MacKay: I should like to put the amendment and the debate in their full context. The distinguished and important organisation Families Against Intimidation and Terror reliably informs me that, so far this year, there have been 58 republican so-called punishment attacks and beatings, and 53 loyalist punishment attacks and beatings. Therefore, we should go back and carefully examine exactly what has been said by the IRA and the loyalist paramilitary groups that have signed up to the Belfast agreement.

We are all grateful that there is a ceasefire—which is particularly welcome in the Province. However, the IRA has described it as a "cessation of military activities". What is behind that phrase? Yes, the IRA has stuck to its word, in that there are no so-called military activities, but there is absolutely no doubt that there is what it would regard as "civil activity".

Although there is absolutely no doubt in the Province or on the mainland that there are no IRA-inspired bomb attacks on military or civilians targets—such as factories and shopping centres—I deeply regret that it cannot be said that there is absolutely no doubt about other activity in many communities in the Province, in which paramilitaries are not only active but dominant. In those communities, the agreement and the so-called ceasefire mean very little.

I should repeat the figures: 58 republican punishment beatings; 53 loyalist punishment beatings. It is very difficult for hon. Members representing constituencies that have not been affected by such beatings to imagine what they really mean. I should dwell on a couple of examples.

After the agreement was signed, John Brown, a 79-year-old New Lodge resident, was dragged from his flat and shot—or knee-capped, as the phrase goes. He will never walk again. For what it is worth to those who committed the atrocity, he was not the alleged child abuser for whom they were looking—that man lived in a different flat, across the corridor, and has now left the area. Such vigilante justice is unacceptable in any society. It is a great pity that it was not condemned by Sinn Fein; commentators and residents in that part of Belfast are convinced that it was an IRA punishment beating.

More recently, a brave and distinguished peace campaigner, Vincent McKenna, was viciously attacked in south Belfast. There had been threats against him, and he knew that that would happen to him if he continued to campaign.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Does the shadow Secretary of State realise that it is possible for paramilitary groups to be controlled? It was interesting that, during the three weeks of the Assembly elections, there were no so-called punishment beatings by the IRA. Does not the right hon. Gentleman think it rather strange that that can happen when it suits the people who control the thugs and gangsters, but that when it does not suit them, such things continue?

Mr. MacKay: I entirely endorse what the hon. Lady says, and I commend the amendment in her name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley). I shall deal with that issue in a moment, because we want to be fully aware that the tap can be turned on and off very easily. Before I do so, I shall mention the latest case, which involves Andrew Kearney.

Andrew Kearney was not associated with drug running and was not a member of a paramilitary organisation, but he was dragged from his flat in north Belfast, while asleep with his two-week-old baby. He was knee-capped and left to bleed to death. His family and Families Against Intimidation and Terror have no doubt that it was an IRA punishment beating. I gather that eight men were involved, so it was not simply a casual, chance mistake. Again, I regret to say that Sinn Fein has been totally silent.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Obviously, everyone on the Labour Benches condemns those acts

committed by thugs; they must be condemned by any decent person. The thugs have shown that they have no respect for the rule of law, which is not surprising.

It is important to recognise that the agreement and the Bill refer to a commitment to non-violence and to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. I mention that because, when the right hon. Gentleman began his remarks, he said that, although there had been no bomb attacks, there had been other outrages. However, the agreement makes it clear that there must be a commitment to non-violence and to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. While the amendment is useful for debating purposes, what it seeks to achieve is already provided in the Bill.

Mr. MacKay: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's comments in their entirety, but he makes a valid point. If he will excuse me, I shall come to it shortly. I want to continue dealing with the present scene and to talk about exiles.

Many hundreds of people have been intimidated into leaving not just their homes but the Province. They are still not able to return to Northern Ireland, and there has been no word from either the paramilitary parties that were represented at the talks or from Sinn Fein-IRA that will encourage them so to do. Equally, there has been no other gesture, such as the revelation of the location of the unmarked graves of some of those who have disappeared. It is only if one speaks to victims' families that one realises how important it is to know where a loved one has ended up and is buried. All of us who have read Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report—I commend the Government on accepting it in full—will realise just how harrowing and trying that is.

I should like to quote from a letter that I received from Families Against Intimidation and Terror. The first quote relates directly to the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and underlines strongly the points that she made in her intervention. It states:

> "In the last month, we have been inundated with reports of IRA threats and harassment. In the three weeks of the Assembly Election campaign, the IRA called a complete halt to virtually all of their violent activities. They have now resumed."

That vividly illustrates the point made by the hon. Member for Vauxhall that the IRA can turn the tap on and off if it so wishes.

4.15 pm

In conclusion, it stated:

> "It is the view of FAIT that IRA activity remains at an unacceptably high level for Sinn Fein to take up positions in the Government of Northern Ireland. If Sinn Fein were allowed to sit in the Executive, while IRA violence continues then many would lose a lot of confidence in the Good Friday Agreement."

The Minister will be aware that that organisation strongly supports the Good Friday agreement and is a force for good in the Province that is doing a great deal of excellent work.

I make no apology for taking a little time to set out what is happening in the Province. It is all to easy for those of us with mainland constituencies, sitting here comfortably in the House of Commons, rightly supporting the Belfast agreement, rightly commending a positive vote in the referendum and rightly delighted that the people of Northern Ireland have elected themselves an Assembly that is starting to work effectively, to think complacently that all is well. That is just not so for many ordinary, decent families across the Province who, more often than not, are the poorest and most vulnerable in the community.

Our amendments seek to strengthen the Bill in a way that we believe does not in any way breach the agreement, so that members of Sinn Fein-IRA cannot take up ministerial positions unless all violence, including the so-called punishment beatings, has ceased for good and the IRA is fully complying with the decommissioning commission. It is not for the Committee, and certainly not for me as shadow Secretary of State, to say who should or should not be Ministers in the Assembly. In fact, I see positive advantages to members of Sinn Fein, now that they have gained sufficient seats in the Assembly, taking up ministerial positions and taking some responsibility. However, in a free democratic society, people can hold ministerial and Executive positions only if they have totally, completely and permanently renounced violence.

As I have already said, renouncing violence does not just mean a military cessation; it means no punishment beatings and co-operating with the decommissioning commission so that all guns and explosives are handed in within two years. I do not for a moment question the integrity of the Secretary of State or any of her foreseeable successors, but, like the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, the Bill as it stands is woolly and uncertain on that point.

The Secretary of State has only to take into account whether Sinn Fein-IRA is fully co-operating. That leaves her open to political pressure which, at a particular point, could lead to her saying, "Yes, I have taken into account that they are not decommissioning. They are still kneecapping, but there are other good reasons why I think that they should continue to be Ministers." That is too great a risk for the House to take—too great a risk for democracy. Our amendments would ensure that Sinn Fein-IRA had to show the Secretary of State and the Assembly—both rightly have responsibilities—that they had given up violence for good and were decommissioning fully.

Anyone foolish enough to suggest that Sinn Fein has nothing to do with the IRA and no influence over it need only look at what Families Against Intimidation and Terror has said and listen to the Secretary of State, who repeated on Second Reading what she has said regularly—that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked. I agree with her, as does every commentator in Northern Ireland. Any reasonable person would agree.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The Secretary of State confirmed on Monday night that she believed that the IRA and Sinn Fein were inextricably linked. The Dublin Government hold that opinion, and I am glad that Her Majesty's Opposition hold it. The Ulster Unionists are worried that Social Democratic and Labour party Members, even when challenged on Monday night, did not confirm that they considered the IRA and Sinn Fein to be inextricably linked. Their failure to confirm that casts doubt on the role of the SDLP in the Assembly when an Executive comes to be formed.

Mr. MacKay: The right hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment on the SDLP's policy on that or

[Mr. MacKay]

any other matter. I note that the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) is in his place and he may try to catch your eye later, Mr. Lord. I am sure that he will wish to answer that point.

The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) knows that we have taken every opportunity to emphasise and underline the inextricable link, which needs to repeated again and again. In fairness to the Secretary of State, she has always done the same, as have the other Ministers present today.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): We cannot make policy pronouncements on behalf of the SDLP, but is not any ambiguity in that party's position about the inextricability of the link between Sinn Fein and the IRA a matter of deep regret?

Mr. MacKay: It would be a matter of regret. I do not want to act as a pundit, commentator and armchair critic. In defence of the SDLP, many of its prominent members, including Members of Parliament, have courageously stood up to IRA intimidation in their communities. I praise the hon. Member for South Down, his parliamentary colleagues and others for what they have done. They have been braver than some of us might have been in the same circumstances.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): If the right hon. Gentleman agrees that the two are inextricably linked, how does he define the term? Does it not mean that they are one and the same and can never be separated?

Mr. MacKay: I find it difficult to speculate about whether the two will be inextricably linked for ever. That is a matter for Sinn Fein and the IRA. All that matters in this debate is that every reasonable person with any knowledge or understanding of Northern Ireland knows that, for the time being, they are inextricably linked and that Sinn Fein is responsible for the actions of the IRA. We have already illustrated that in the debate.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North) *rose—*

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down) *rose—*

Mr. MacKay: I am not making much progress, but I shall give way to the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and then to the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney).

Mr. McNamara: Clause 23(6) states:

"If the Secretary of State is of the opinion that the Assembly ought to consider—

(a) a resolution . . . in relation to a Minister; or

(b) a resolution . . . in relation to a political party".

In other words, if a party is not fully committed to peaceful and democratic means, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may bring that to the attention of the Assembly and ask the Presiding Officer to table the necessary motion. The Assembly has that same power. As the Bill implements and mirrors the agreement extremely well and covers the hon. Gentleman's points, why is he seeking to undermine the agreement, precisely as he sought to do in debates on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill? He knows perfectly well that the position of my right hon. Friend and of the Government is that stated in the Bill, which reflects precisely his points.

Mr. MacKay: If the hon. Gentleman had been slightly more patient, he would have heard me fully address that in my second and final point. I shall answer the point, although I should first give way to the hon. and learned Member for North Down, who I suspect will raise another point. When I fully answer the hon. Member for Hull, North, he will see that at no stage have we tried to undermine the agreement. We have acted as a responsible Opposition and done our job of scrutinising legislation. When we think something is wrong, we say so without fear or favour.

Mr. Robert McCartney: My point is very short and, perhaps, semantic. How can two bodies be inextricably linked "for the time being"? Inextricable means that they cannot ever be separated. What the right hon. Gentleman said is like saying that one is permanently committed to something for the time being.

Mr. MacKay: I have no intention of entering into a semantic debate with the hon. and learned Gentleman. Nothing would please him more than for me to do so; he would have a great deal of fun. I shall stick to saying that everybody believes that, at this moment and for the foreseeable future, Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked, but there could be a circumstance in future in which they might separate. Such speculation is for later and is not relevant to the debate. As this is a time-limited debate, I am not serving the Committee by pursuing that red herring.

The hon. Member for Hull, North suggests that we are in breach of the agreement. He should take that up with the Prime Minister, whose words I quoted in a previous debate on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. During Prime Minister's Question Time on Wednesday 6 May, the Prime Minister made it clear from the Dispatch Box that decommissioning was relevant and linked not just to the release of prisoners but to Ministers taking office. When pressed by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, he fully confirmed that. I have no doubt that he made it clear when he went to Northern Ireland in the final days before the referendum—campaigning for a yes vote, as were my right hon. Friend and I. That was the Prime Minister's interpretation of the agreement; it is my interpretation of the agreement.

If the Minister accepts my amendment, he will not be in breach of the agreement. He will merely be following what his Prime Minister said on the Floor of the House. We all wish the Minister well in the reshuffle in the next few days. I may embarrass him by what I am about to say.

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman may endanger the Minister's chances.

Mr. MacKay: Indeed, what I say may ruin the Minister's chances in the reshuffle. We have the greatest respect for the Minister's negotiating skills and his work—very much behind the scenes—throughout the run-up to the Good Friday agreement. We hope that he stays in his present post, but we should be delighted if he were further promoted.

Mr. Winnick: There was no need for the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) to apologise for

describing to the Committee the acts of intimidation and violence; we have a duty to be kept informed. We are informed by reading about those acts, but we should discuss them, too, at the appropriate time, which is now.

The right hon. Gentleman also said that it is easy for us on the green Benches of the House of Commons to be somewhat isolated from what is going on. Fortunately, on the mainland we are not subjected to such acts of thuggery. None the less, as British citizens are subjected to them, it is only right that every opportunity should be given to discuss and denounce what are undoubtedly crimes.

As I said in my intervention in the right hon. Gentleman's speech, Labour Members deplore without exception all the acts that he described. However, it is important to recognise that what is written in the agreement and what is clearly set out in the Bill is a commitment to non-violence.

At the beginning of his speech, the right hon. Gentleman said that when we talk about violence we do not mean military action alone. I certainly agree. Of course the continuation of the ceasefire by the IRA and the loyalist groups that are observing it is welcome. That is how things should continue indefinitely; that goes without saying. However, the acts that the right hon. Gentleman described are clearly outlawed by the agreement, too.

4.30 pm

Annexe A to strand 1 contains a pledge of office that those who take up Executive positions have to take, as well as agreeing to all the other matter set out in the agreement. Item (b) of annexe A is a

"commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful democratic means".

There is no ambiguity about that. If those who take up office are in any way involved in, or support, acts such as those that the right hon. Gentleman described, under the agreement they have no right to hold that office. There is no ambiguity about that either.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I have to dispute what the hon. Gentleman says. Nothing in the agreement prevents the representatives of paramilitary organisations from taking up ministerial office. They have to sign a pledge of office or give a commitment to a pledge of office, part of which includes a supposed commitment to peaceful means—but there is no way of testing that. We have seen in the past that Sinn Fein-IRA are prepared to sign up to the Mitchell principles and then they will drive a cart and horse through them—and there is nothing that anybody can do about it. Let people not be mistaken: Sinn Fein-IRA representatives will take ministerial office in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the IRA will continue its acts of barbarism and violence.

Mr. Winnick: I am coming to the first part of what the hon. Gentleman said. He is, as he is entitled to be, totally opposed to the agreement, and he will find every possible argument and justification for trying to ensure that it is not put into practice and is not successful. I understand his point of view. I totally disagree with it, but I understand it; it comes from his particular political viewpoint.

The hon. Gentleman says that anybody can sign the pledge but that it would not mean anything. That is possible; no one denies it—but that is not the end of the matter. The hon. Gentleman said what he thought would happen, and he would have us believe that no further action would be taken—that all that anyone who is either a party to violence or involved in violence has to do is give a pledge and that is the end of the matter.

That is not so. If it were, the Committee would be right to be concerned. However, clause 23 clearly sets out that the Secretary of State will give an opinion at the appropriate time on

"whether the Minister or party concerned . . . is committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means to achieve his or its objectives"

and

"has ceased to be involved in any acts of violence or of preparation for violence".

Mr. Donaldson *rose—*

Mr. Winnick: Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman again, let me say that it is wrong to give the impression that the pledge has only to be given and no further action will be taken. As is clearly set out both in the agreement and in the Bill, the Secretary of State has powers that no doubt she would use when it was alleged that a Minister was committed to violence.

Mr. Donaldson: My point—there is a distinction—is that the Secretary of State is not called on to give that opinion before the individual takes up ministerial office. She may give that opinion afterwards, but nothing in the Bill requires her to do so before the individual takes up office—there is no effective mechanism to prevent an individual from taking up office. I agree that the mechanism could subsequently be used to have the person removed from office, but where is the bar to someone taking up office? It certainly does not lie in the Secretary of State's hands.

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman criticises the way in which someone can take up office, but he has conceded that the Bill contains appropriate safeguards and that giving a pledge is not the end of the matter for all time.

Mr. Robert McCartney: The hon. Gentleman has laid much emphasis on the safeguards relating to the exclusion from office of a person or a party involved in terror, but is he aware that, since 1 January this year, the Provisional IRA, for which Sinn Fein is a front—there will be two Sinn Fein Ministers—has shot 31 people, a number of them fatally? None of that has made the Secretary of State say, "You folk, while you continue to behave like this, will never get into the Assembly, let alone into Executive office."

Mr. Winnick: I believe that the hon. and learned Gentleman was present at the most recent Northern Ireland questions, when the Secretary of State made it perfectly clear that, if there was evidence that people were a party to or supported violence, she would take appropriate action. None of us knows exactly who is involved in acts of violence. The Provisional IRA may be involved, and I am no more likely to act as an apologist for that organisation than is the hon. and learned Gentleman. However, we read about breakaway groups from the IRA—

Mr. Robert McCartney *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Winnick: The hon. and learned Gentleman dismisses that, as he wants us to believe that the IRA and

[Mr. Winnick]

Sinn Fein are continuing to engage in violence and that the agreement is bogus. Apart from the two Democratic Unionist party Members, no one is more opposed to the agreement than he is.

Mr. Robert McCartney *rose—*

Mr. Winnick: No, I shall not give way. The hon. and learned Gentleman strenuously opposed the agreement.

Mr. MacKay: The hon. Gentleman has a long and distinguished record of speaking out against terrorism and violence, and I applaud that. Splinter groups may have been committing some of the so-called military activity on the border and elsewhere, but it is equally clear from the evidence given by Families Against Intimidation and Terror, the security forces and local residents that the IRA is behind the punishment beatings. Given that, does he agree that, until those beatings well and truly stop, Sinn Fein members cannot become Ministers in the Assembly?

Mr. Winnick: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, and I agree that acts of violence should be condemned at every opportunity, whichever side of the sectarian divide commits them. It is part of the responsibility of the Secretary of State, as set out in the agreement and clause 23 of the Bill, to decide whether action should be taken once the Assembly is up and running and the Executive is working.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell spoke kindly about my opposition to terrorist violence, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her ministerial team are no less opposed to acts of violence. They denounce acts of violence in the same way as the right hon. Member and I do. There is no exclusive club for denouncing those acts.

We should bear in mind the fact that the purpose of the agreement is to bring about a situation in Northern Ireland that is totally unlike what has occurred in the last quarter of a century. The right hon. Member will agree with that. We want to bring about a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. In dealing with terrorist organisations—or with those who have been involved in such organisations—there is always the possibility that they could resort to acts of terror.

We are taking a gamble—no one would deny that. The difference between those of us who support the agreement and those who oppose it is that we believe that that gamble is worth taking. The ceasefire has taken place, and we have written into the proposed legislation safeguards to prevent those who are involved in violence from holding ministerial office in Northern Ireland. That is very important.

Mr. MacKay: The hon. Gentleman is never slow in giving the Committee his opinion, but he has failed to say whether he personally—in the light of compelling, overwhelming evidence that the IRA is continuing punishment beatings—would recommend that its representatives should not take office. When he says that we should take a gamble, does he mean that we should turn a blind eye to punishment beatings? If he does, that would be unfortunate and it would not match his record in the House.

Mr. Winnick: I meant that we were taking a gamble on whether the agreement will work and whether it will lead to a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. There is no guarantee that any agreement will work. Those who support the agreement take the view that it is worth taking a chance—perhaps the word "gamble" was inappropriate—to see whether non-violent means work and to ensure that those who engage in violence will no longer be accepted.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell asked me a direct question. The right answer is that, if a Secretary of State comes to the view that those involved in ministerial office in Northern Ireland are—despite their pledge of office—involved in violence or support it, they should not be involved any longer. There is no difference between us on that.

The difference is whether the amendment is necessary. It goes outside the agreement, and we should be careful that we legislate precisely for what the agreement stands for. If we are against those holding ministerial office being involved in violence, that is right and proper, because such people would be breaking the agreement. Therefore, in giving every opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to have a chance to live in peace, like the rest of us on the mainland, our responsibility is to legislate along the lines of the agreement—word for word, to a large extent. The amendment is unnecessary, because the safeguards already exist.

Our detestation of violence—which the right hon. Member for Bracknell stated—is written into the agreement and the Bill. We should proceed on the basis of the Bill.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): As the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and others have said, the entire process has been based on the fundamental principle that there must be a commitment to peace and democracy. That is the objective of the process—to put in place provisions that fill the democratic deficit that has existed in Northern Ireland for far too long, and to do so on the basis of peace. That has been the objective throughout.

In some aspects, we have been travelling in hope, rather than having a sound basis at every turn—particularly in terms of violence. However, travelling in hope is one thing; engaging in wishful thinking is another. We need to distinguish between the two. I disagreed with the use of the term "gamble" by the hon. Member for Walsall, North. I do not like to think that we are gambling with the security of a society and with the peace, livelihoods and lives of people. It may be necessary occasionally to take risks, but those should be carefully calculated and we should be careful of the threats involved.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) referred to some of the appalling acts of violence in recent weeks. I will not labour the point with regard to them, except to underline some aspects which relate to the Bill. Those acts of violence are not the only ones; there have been others which we abhor and condemn. I would not want anyone to run away with the notion that, because we are focusing, for the purpose of this debate, on the actions of certain paramilitaries—particularly republican paramilitaries—we have forgotten other acts.

4.45 pm

Cases have been mentioned which occurred over the last weekend, including the attack on Vincent McKenna.

The key point is that Mr. McKenna—a former republican activist who knows who he is dealing with in the area—said to journalists afterwards that he recognised among his assailants two leading members of the IRA in the lower Ormeau area. That is clearly evidence.

Then, there was the attack on Mr. Kearney, which resulted in his death. As the right hon. Member for Bracknell pointed out, the number of people involved and the circumstances show that that was not just a casual matter, but involved an organisation. We should bear it in mind that Mr. Kearney considered himself under threat, to such an extent that his mother went to Sinn Fein some time ago and received an assurance from Sinn Fein that her son would be safe. However, after that, he got into another row with a godfather in west Belfast.

It is interesting that RUC officers are saying privately that Mr. Kearney's killing has all the fingerprints of the IRA—a term which I am sure is used metaphorically. That underlines what is obvious to anyone familiar with the situation in Northern Ireland. Those things happening in certain places, at certain times and in certain circumstances give rise to strong presumptions, which point in a particular way.

There was a case in Downpatrick a couple of weeks ago—in the constituency of the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady)—in which an attack was carried out by, we believe, the IRA. The victim was shot six times in the legs and once in the back, aiming for the spine—what the IRA call a 50-50 job, as it gives the person a 50 per cent. chance of survival.

There was also the mortar attack in Newry. In Newry, the local council chairman is a Sinn Fein councillor. The mortar attack was claimed on behalf of persons close to the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, which is described as a republican dissident organisation. The Sinn Fein council chairman refused to condemn the attack when challenged to do so—he merely wished that those involved would stop it. We need something stronger than that.

A month or two ago, some hints appeared from Sinn Fein that it might finally be about to face up to its responsibilities—because Sinn Fein has responsibilities also. Hints were dropped by the leader in the Maze prison that the IRA might contemplate decommissioning their weapons at some point. At around the same time, leading members of Sinn Fein were briefing the press that they would deal with the issue of the disappeared. We were told that there would be an announcement soon, when they would reveal the whereabouts of those who have disappeared—believed kidnapped by the IRA, and murdered—over the past 20 years. Those hints were given in briefings to the press by senior members of Sinn Fein. They created the expectation that they were going to face up to their responsibilities.

Since then, the tempo of incidents stemming from dissident republicans has increased. Although they are rightly described as such, we cannot forget that the person close to the 32 County Sovereignty Committee who is believed to be directing operations is a former IRA chief of staff, who has access to IRA material and is believed to have received assistance from members of the IRA. The increased tempo of operations gives rise to suspicions.

Mr. Winnick: As I said, it may well be that the IRA—what we would usually refer to as the Provisional IRA—is responsible, and we know what action needs to be taken in such circumstances. The right hon. Gentleman referred to dissident IRA groups. Is it not interesting that those groups, who totally oppose the agreement—so much for the claim among Unionists that what has happened is a victory for the IRA—have undoubtedly carried out other acts of thuggery, if not those particular incidents, because they want to discredit the agreement as much as possible and to destroy it? They view it as a betrayal of the original intention to bring about a united Ireland.

Mr. Trimble: The hon. Gentleman is certainly accurate with regard to some groups—for example, members of Republican Sinn Fein, which has existed for a long time, who have throughout predicted that the current leadership of the republican movement would sell them out. Continuity IRA is linked to that group, so the hon. Gentleman's comments were appropriate in that regard.

The situation is murky when it comes to the group that is close to the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, which is a more recent development. Although a small number of people are known adherents, there is good reason to suspect that they are receiving practical assistance from members of the mainstream IRA. It is also believed that they have connections with people in the Belfast area who are still prominent in the current leadership of the mainstream IRA. The situation is not clear-cut.

We do not know all the ins and outs of the operations of the republican movement. Assuming that there are hawks and doves within that movement is a common mistake. There are no doves within that organisation, just hawks and fiercer hawks—I think that that is the best description. There is certainly jockeying for position within the organisation, and there may well have been a shift in emphasis as regards its objectives, but we do not know. We can only consider the circumstances, and I have been focusing on recent events, pointing out that the tempo of the operations of the 32 County Sovereignty Committee seems to have increased, which is a concern, particularly as we suspect linkages with and assistance from the mainstream IRA.

The leadership—or professed leadership—of the republican movement has not behaved responsibly in recent weeks. I am thinking in particular of the behaviour of the hon. Member for Mid-Ulster (Mr. McGuinness), who was returned to serve that constituency but has not carried out his obligations in that respect. During the recent difficulties, he made a highly publicised visit to the Garvaghy road, not to render assistance or reduce the temperature but to increase it and wind the situation up at the beginning of the weekend of 12 July. No doubt he did so in the hope of inciting loyalists there to further violence. I am sure from his behaviour, demeanour and what he said that that was his intention, and that too shows where the republican movement may be at present, as do the beatings and killings, to which we have already referred.

On Second Reading on Monday, I referred to clause 23, in particular clause 23(2), pointing out that, although there may be some doubt about whether clause 23(1), which refers to individuals, could operate before people took up office, no such doubt can exist with regard to subsection (2), which refers to a "party". That subsection would make it perfectly possible for the Assembly to declare, prior to any individual taking up office, that it

[Mr. Trimble]

lacked confidence in the commitment to peace and democracy of a political party. In such a situation, one should be focusing on the party and not the individual.

I believe that at least one Sinn Fein representative in the Assembly has not been an active terrorist—or at least I have been told so by journalists, and I occasionally respect what they say, although I have no other basis for the belief. I think that there is only one such representative, although there may be more. It is important to focus on the party and, given the characteristics of the organisation concerned, it would be appropriate to proceed against the party as a whole and record a lack of confidence.

As things stand, neither I nor anyone else who looks at the circumstances honestly and clearly can say that we have confidence in the commitment of Sinn Fein-IRA to peaceful means and the democratic process.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): What does the right hon. Gentleman imagine would be the impact of the amendments if there turned out to be a split within Sinn Fein, or any organisation involved in the Northern Ireland political environment, with one side committed to democratic progress and the other willing to embark on violence? Would the amendments not make it more difficult for the pro-democrats to win, and would they not be more likely to lose to others who are not committed to progress?

Mr. Trimble: I caution the hon. Gentleman against too quickly coming to the conclusion that there are hawks and doves within the republican movement and that it embraces people who genuinely want to move to a democratic process. I do not exclude the possibility of people changing, but we need evidence of that. We can only proceed on the evidence that is there, and the events of the past few weeks seem to show that that is pointing one way. We must take account of that fact.

I referred to the debate on Monday. I was particularly pleased at the comments of the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), who concluded:

"We stand by that agreement in all its manifestations, in its entirety and its integrity."—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 839.]

We should reflect on that final word. It is essential not only that we maintain the entirety of the agreement, of course, but that we maintain its integrity. Fundamental to the agreement is the commitment to peaceful means and the democratic process.

The Conservative amendment departs from the terminology that the Government have used in clause 23(7). There are arguments both ways. There are three main differences between the amendment and subsection (7).

The Bill directs the Secretary of State to "take into account" various factors. "Take into account" may be a weak formulation. The Bill says:

"the Secretary of State shall in particular take into account"

the factors listed. The amendment uses the term "if he believes". I am not sure that that is any stronger. It is six of one and half a dozen of the other.

The amendment refers to the commitment in the agreement to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms by 22 May 2000. That may be bold, but the agreement clearly states a two-year time scale, running from 28 May. That part of the amendment would amplify, rather than change, the agreement, which would be a benefit.

5 pm

The insertion of the word "assisting" in paragraph (c), so that it reads

"directing, assisting or promoting acts violence committed or planned by other people",

could also be beneficial. That paragraph is directed towards terrorism conducted by proxy, and the terminology in the amendment would be preferable.

The best amendments in terms of terminology are Nos. 200 and 201, because they make express reference to the "so-called punishment beatings". I appreciate the fact that those amendments are starred and cannot be made today, but I hope that the Government will consider them carefully on Report or in another place. I strongly support that appropriate change.

It has been said that, at the end of the day, it is for the Assembly to decide whether the exclusion provisions will operate. I understand the reasons for the concern that the system may not operate as it should. The first sentence in the relevant paragraph in the agreement says:

"An individual may be removed from office following a decision of the Assembly taken on a cross-community basis, if (s)he loses the confidence of the Assembly . . . for failure to meet his or her responsibilities including . . . those set out in the Pledge of Office."

The second sentence is of a somewhat different character:

"Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means, and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office under these provisions."

That sentence takes a much more peremptory approach. That is why I tabled amendment No. 115, which would move matters from being purely for the Assembly to decide, and would state the basic principles under which a person would not be entitled to hold office. That would be entirely within the letter and spirit of the second sentence in the paragraph and would make the matter justiciable, taking it out of the sole purview of the Assembly and allowing it to come before the courts.

Some may say that such matters would be difficult to prove in court, but being civil matters they would have to be proven only on the balance of probabilities. Some may apply extremely high standards and may not be convinced even by evidence that most reasonable men would regard as proving a case beyond reasonable doubt, so there may be some value in the balance of probabilities being sufficient.

It is essential to have the power to exclude those who are not committed to peaceful means and the democratic process. We have operated in the hope that people will move to a clear, unequivocal commitment to peace and democracy, and the talks process, the agreement and the Assembly have offered the opportunity to participate—that is the carrot that is held out—to people who may wish to move along the path to peace, but it is essential to retain the sanction against those who are not so moving, and especially those who think that they can take the benefit of the agreement without excepting the obligations that go with it.

Exclusion of Sinn Fein, for example, would not be the end of the Assembly. In case anyone has misinterpreted what we have said, let me underline the fact that we are

not following an agenda of exclusion. At the Assembly's first meeting, I said that we had never said that, because a person has a past, he cannot have a future.

We recognise that it is possible for people to change. We have seen it happen, not only with people but with organisations that were once involved in paramilitary activity and have emancipated themselves from it. I am thinking, obviously, of the official IRA—official Sinn Fein—which has moved over the years so that it is now in the democratic left, and clearly committed to peace and democracy. We trust that the same path is followed by some parties that were formerly involved in loyalist paramilitarism.

We want such change to occur. We want people to commit themselves unequivocally to peace and democracy, but we must say to them, with all the emphasis that we can muster, that they must indeed reform themselves, and that, if they do not, we will not be deceived by a few soft words and will insist on a course of conduct that is consistent with the changes that are necessary. As the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh said, it is essential to maintain not only the entirety, but the integrity of the agreement.

Kate Hoey: I know that amendments Nos. 200 and 201 cannot be voted on, but I hope that the Minister will consider how they may be introduced at a different stage.

What the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said about the integrity of the peace settlement is absolutely crucial. I campaigned for a yes vote in Northern Ireland, and I was absolutely delighted at the result, but I know from personal experience that the vote was finely balance a right up to the last, and the result looked extremely dodgy—to use a perhaps unparliamentary term—in the final week.

People had a desperate desire for peace. They wanted a coming together, and to feel that they could work with people from different communities. Underlying their hopes, however, was fear that paramilitary groups on both sides did not mean what they said. Parliament owes it to those who were influenced by the feeling that they wanted peace above all to make sure that the Bill does everything possible to act on fear of continued violence and fear that people are not committed to the democratic road.

The terminology of clause 23 is vital. I cannot see why the Minister cannot accept amendment No. 15. Decommissioning must be mentioned somewhere in the Bill. It was mentioned in the agreement, and it played a great part in the last few days of the referendum campaign.

Mr. Robert McCartney: The hon. Lady emphasises how fragile the vote was right up to the last moment. Does she agree that the Prime Minister's pledges on Thursday 21 May on the release of prisoners and on whether Sinn Fein could sit down in government without decommissioning allayed the fears of many of those who ultimately voted yes?

Kate Hoey: The hon. and learned Gentleman pre-empts me. I was going to say how important the Prime Minister's words were. My right hon. Friend made it clear that Ministers in the Government must be committed to peaceful means. He did not give a commitment that his every word would be in the Bill, but there is no doubt that the people of Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, felt that that was what their Prime Minister meant. How his words are implemented is up to Parliament.

Clause 23(1)(c) includes the incredibly wide ranging definition, "for any other reason". Given that definition, I cannot understand why the Bill cannot include a reference to

"not co-operating fully with any Commission",

which would send out the straightforward message that we mean what we say about decommissioning. I mean it—and I hope that the rest of Parliament means it—when I say that decommissioning must happen. I do not say that every armament must be handed over, but parties and Ministers must make a commitment to co-operate with the commission.

Families Against Intimidation and Terror is a well respected organisation. Its development officer, Glyn Roberts, has done an enormous amount of work, just as her predecessor did. FAIT works within the community where some of the worst atrocities are happening. It is that sharp end of day-to-day experiences that those of us who represent constituencies in the rest of the United Kingdom cannot possibly understand. Although I come from Northern Ireland, and go home there regularly, I never feel able to talk about what it is like to live on the peace line in north Belfast, or to live in places where there is intimidation, fear and a threat of violence that might affect one's own family, children or parents.

5.15 pm

FAIT does not speak without thinking, so I am worried by the fact that it has said clearly that the level of IRA activity is so unacceptably high that Sinn Fein cannot take positions in the Government of Northern Ireland. Horrific events over the past few weeks include the Vincent McKenna incident and the killing of Mr. Kearney, which are both being investigated by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. If, at the end of the investigations, there is categorical proof that Mr. Kearney was killed by members of the IRA, will that mean, even at this stage, that representatives of Sinn Fein cannot sit down in Government in the new Assembly?

It is all very well to talk in parliamentary language, but the people of Northern Ireland want to know what proof is required to demonstrate that the IRA or the paramilitaries on the so-called loyalist side are still engaging in terrible actions. If we can prove that only breakaway groups on either side are conducting those actions, those groups must be chased by the authorities. However, there is a real possibility that, in our desperation to make the agreement work, to make the Assembly work and to bring about reconciliation, we will continue always to give the benefit of the doubt to the terrorists. The Minister must reassure us that that simply will not happen.

Why is it impossible to accept the amendments tabled by the First Minister of the Assembly? It is right that we are passing the Bill as quickly as we can, but we must not forget how much time we spent on similar legislation for the Scottish and Welsh assemblies. Some of my hon. Friends have shown irritation at anyone who wants to question parts of the Bill. They seem to have the idea that, since the agreement has happened, we should all just pass the Bill. That is not what Parliament is for. We must get

[Kate Hoey]

the Bill on the statute book as quickly as we can, but reasonable people must be allowed to ask reasonable questions. We should try to learn from those who live in Northern Ireland, and who know what is happening there. That is why the Minister should ensure that action is taken against those involved in the so-called punishment beatings, intimidation and terror that happen in Northern Ireland every day—although, strangely enough, they all stopped during the Assembly elections. The people of Northern Ireland must be treated with the same dignity that we expect for our constituents.

Mr. Peter Robinson: The way in which we deal with clause 23 will determine the extent to which the Assembly is likely to function properly. I want to deal with the deceit and hypocrisy surrounding dealings before, during and after the referendum on issues central to clause 23.

First, I should say to the Minister that, for the most part, I regard the references in clause 23 as a faithful representation of what is outlined in the agreement. It contains some excesses and we have tabled amendments to deal with those excesses, which principally relate to clause 23(1)(c). For the greater part, the clause puts into legislative form the commitments made in paragraph 25 of the Belfast agreement.

When I read that agreement and interpreted it, I, like many of my colleagues, concluded that it meant precisely what the Minister and the drafting staff have put into the Bill. We went up and down the country warning the people of Northern Ireland that, if the measure was passed by the House of Commons and given support in a referendum, Sinn Fein would automatically have representation in Government and there would be no effective way of removing its representatives from Government. Therefore, whoever else in the Committee might be surprised when they see in bold relief the terminology used in clause 23, no one among my colleagues will be in the least surprised at its impact.

Paragraph 25 of the agreement states:

"An individual may be removed from office following a decision of the Assembly taken on a cross-community basis, if (s)he loses the confidence of the Assembly, voting on a cross-community basis, for failure to meet his or her responsibilities including, inter alia, those set out in the Pledge of Office."

I shall come to the remaining part of that paragraph later, having reached a very different conclusion from the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble).

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman says that he and his colleagues did everything they could to warn the electorate in Northern Ireland about the agreement, yet, despite that warning, the people of Northern Ireland by an overwhelming majority decided to support the agreement. Should we not follow the large majority in Northern Ireland who made that decision in a democratic way?

Mr. Robinson: I shall come in a moment or two to the reason why people in Northern Ireland voted for the agreement in the numbers that they did in the referendum. If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the speech made by his hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), he would have heard about some of the issues that led the people of Northern Ireland to vote in the way that they did.

During the referendum campaign, when my colleagues and I held meetings up and down the Province and indicated our understanding of the agreement and what it would mean, there were voices that said, "That is rubbish. Don't listen to these men—they are misleading you. We shall be able to control whether Sinn Fein-IRA get into an Executive. The Unionists themselves will be able to control that matter." That was a commitment given to the people by the Ulster Unionist party.

The Belfast News Letter of Saturday 9 May carried an article under the heading "Unionists must go forward with confidence in themselves". The article consisted of Mervyn Pauley interviewing the leader of the Ulster Unionist party, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann. In that interview, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"I think the unionist community has confidence in itself. We have the capacity ourselves to exclude Sinn Fein from office, if we so wish, because we are going to have a majority in the Assembly, now that is clearly going to be the case. Why then should people worry what an Assembly will do if they are going to have the majority in it? The Agreement itself is absolutely clear that only people who have a genuine commitment to peaceful means and a democratic process can accept office. Those words were fudged in the past but they were fudged by governments. It's not going to be a question for Government in the future, it's going to be a question for the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives."

The words were clear. The right hon. Gentleman said, and I repeat:

"We have the capacity ourselves to exclude Sinn Fein from office."

The "we" is defined as the Unionist community.

Having made the challenge on Second Reading, I make it again: where in the Bill—or, indeed, the agreement—will the Unionist community have the capacity to exclude Sinn Fein from Government? Clearly, it cannot be done. The people of Northern Ireland were deceived by the right hon. Gentleman on that vital issue.

However, the right hon. Gentleman was not the only one who made remarks of that sort. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had received opinion polls and reports from focus groups, all of which showed him that, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall said, support was moving away from the yes campaign; and that the arguments of the no campaign that Sinn Fein would be in government and could not be removed from government were beginning to hold sway in the Province. Something had to be done, and the Prime Minister took control of the yes campaign in Northern Ireland. His office almost moved to Northern Ireland, and it was his spin doctors who started working in the Province.

What did the Prime Minister have to say to the people of Northern Ireland on this vital issue? I quote from the Belfast News Letter of 14 May the Prime Minister's words:

"People need to know that, if they are sitting down in the room of the executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly with other people then they are not sitting there with the guns under the table, outside the door and all the rest of it . . . That can't happen and we must make it absolutely clear that that can't happen."

Of course, under the Bill, it will happen. Under the Bill, there is nothing to stop it happening.

The Prime Minister came to Balmoral. It is remarkable that he came all that distance to that function apparently primarily to convince an individual who was not at Balmoral, the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson). During the speech he made there,

he listed a series of factors that were crucial to the question whether the terms and spirit of the agreement were being met by the participants. Throughout, there were clear indications that the Prime Minister was speaking to the people of Northern Ireland and telling them, "Don't worry about these issues. When it comes to the legislative process, I'll take care of it." That is what the people were led to believe—that the Prime Minister had it all in hand.

However, still the people were not entirely convinced, and the Prime Minister had to make another journey to Northern Ireland. On large billboard posters in handwriting, he signed five pledges to the people of Northern Ireland, one of which was to exclude from the Government of Northern Ireland those who would use or threaten violence. Again, under the Bill, there is no provision for such people to be excluded from Government, save if they themselves are not prepared to accept the pledge of office, or if the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) and his party decide that they want them to be excluded. *[Interruption.]* From what has been said, there can be little doubt about that, and I can almost guarantee support from the Unionist-designated Members of the Assembly.

If the hon. Member for South Down would like me to give way so that he can state that, on the basis of what he knows today—based simply on the cases of Vincent McKenna and Andrew Kearney—he recognises the involvement of Sinn Fein-IRA in the killing and beating and that they have breached the conditions set down in the Bill, I shall give way. If he wants to tell me that, on that basis, he would be prepared to have them excluded or removed from office, I shall give way to him. The hon. Gentleman does not want me to give way, which is telling.

As the spokesman for the official Opposition, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) said, the Prime Minister made, in this House, the clearest possible statement demonstrating that he wanted substantial decommissioning before Sinn Fein could enjoy the benefits of prison releases or its presence in the Government of Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister had earlier written to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann:

"I understand your problem with paragraph 25 of Strand 1 is that it requires decisions on those who should be excluded or removed from office in the Northern Ireland Executive to be taken on a cross-community basis. This letter is to let you know that if, during the course of the first six months of the shadow Assembly or the Assembly itself, these provisions have been shown to be ineffective, we will support changes to these provisions to enable them to be made properly effective in preventing such people from holding office."

5.30 pm

To the casual reader, the uninitiated and the layman, that letter might seem to provide a guarantee from the Prime Minister, and the right hon. Gentleman was prepared to take it as such. However, the more careful reader will have noted the use of the word "support". The letter said,

"we will support changes to these provisions".

It does not say that the Prime Minister is committed to changes to the provisions; it says simply that he will support changes.

The Prime Minister had to use the word "support" because it is not up to him, or even the House, to make that determination. He uses that word because he recognises that there are others whose support is also required. They are those who signed up to the Belfast Agreement on 10 April. It is a multi-party agreement and cannot be unilaterally changed, which is why the Prime Minister did not give a commitment unilaterally to change it. He said that he would simply be one of those who supported changes if the provisions did not meet the requirements of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann.

Will the Minister confirm or deny my interpretation of the Prime Minister's letter? Will he, in responding to the debate, make it clear that the support referred to in the letter would be provided along with the support of others, or are the Prime Minister and Government prepared to introduce legislation to change the provisions of the Bill if it does not prove to be effective? I suspect that my initial interpretation of the letter is accurate, and that the Prime Minister has no intention of acting unilaterally.

I find it difficult to accept the amount of hypocrisy on this subject. I find it difficult to listen to Members telling the House or the Committee how they need to make changes to the Bill when they accepted its provisions in the first place. If those provisions are not good enough, why did they sign up to them on 10 April? If these matters needed to be dealt with, why did they not include them on 10 April before they signed? They signed up to the agreement, including the provisions that the Committee is now discussing. Not only that—in the opening part of the agreement, they pledged to work in good faith

"to ensure the success of each and every one of the arrangements to be established under this agreement."

Having made that pledge, they now, at least publicly, state that they are seeking to have the arrangements improved beyond the agreement's initial provisions.

More than that, those people went out and sold the agreement to the electorate in Northern Ireland. Now the right hon. Member for Upper Bann has profited by becoming the First Minister designate in Northern Ireland. While his amendment—and the Tory amendment—would slightly strengthen the terminology in the Bill, and to that extent would be welcome, it is unworkable. Even though the wording in various subsections might be tightened, the responsibility would still fall on the Assembly, in a cross-community vote. A political decision will therefore be made. A decision will be made by nationalists about whether they will ditch Sinn Fein. Even if every Unionist in the Assembly and an overwhelming majority of Assembly Members voted for the exclusion of Sinn Fein, its Members would remain in the Executive unless the SDLP voted to exclude them.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the agreement and the Bill to give effect to it are the product of the Hume-Adams agreement in 1993, and that it is certain that the SDLP will never move to have its partner, Sinn Fein, removed from the Assembly?

Mr. Robinson: I agree entirely with the hon. and learned Gentleman. Nobody labours under the assumption that SDLP Members will wake up one morning and decide that it is time to exclude Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness from the Assembly. No matter what they do, that will not happen. It is therefore necessary for the Government to include in the Bill a mechanism whereby they can be excluded which does not require consensus in the Assembly. The amendments in my name and those of

[Mr. Robinson]

my hon. Friends would have had that effect. They would have turned the situation around and required Sinn Fein Members to get a cross-community vote to remain in office.

I cannot speak to those amendments, Nos. 80 and 81, because unfortunately they were not selected. Strangely, however, much of their substance is included in amendment No. 75, which was selected, even though it relates to clause 15, not clause 23. I am sure that it would have been better if the Chairman of Ways and Means had selected amendments Nos. 80 and 81 instead of amendment No. 75. I can, however, discuss the principle because it is the same in each case—and, as I know that the Government will not readily accept any of the amendments, it will probably make no practical difference in the end.

Our amendment would have put the onus on Sinn Fein-IRA to convince the Assembly, rather than the other way round. The Committee needs to deal with that matter. It is not good enough for the Government to hope that things might turn out all right on the day. The killing of Andrew Kearney was clearly carried out by the Provisional IRA. Nobody but the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) seems to be in any doubt about that. The RUC, the newspapers and the family recognise that the killing was carried out by the IRA. On that basis, I am entitled to ask what would happen if we were in the Assembly today, making a decision about the exclusion of Sinn Fein-IRA. I do not need to ask, because I know.

Exactly the same criteria apply with regard to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. Has anyone heard the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland make a statement to the effect that, because of the killing of Mr. Kearney by the Provisional IRA, its prisoners will not be released because the killing was a breach of the provisions of that Bill?

There was an attempt to kill the well-known bomber republican—but now "peace activist"—Mr. Vincent McKenna. He identified among his assailants well-known members of the battalion from the Ormeau road of the Provisional IRA. There could not be better evidence; but the Secretary of State and others continue to bury their head in the sand, and will not take action. The Secretary of State is required to take action now on that issue, not simply as a result of the Bill, but on the basis of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. If she is not prepared to operate on the basis of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, she will not operate on the basis of the provision that we are debating.

Let no one therefore rely on the third of the three mechanisms for dealing with this matter—the mechanism whereby the Secretary of State, considering that someone has breached the provisions of the Act, asks the Presiding Officer to have the matter dealt with by way of a resolution. That will be the slowest of the mechanisms, and the least likely to be used. Even if it was used, the decision as to whether that person was expelled would not be for the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State can only have the matter referred to the Presiding Officer and, through the Presiding Officer, to the Assembly. Ultimately, the decision—once again—will be a political decision; a decision which will fall when the hands of the SDLP refuse to co-operate to have their colleagues in Sinn Fein expelled from the Executive.

The sad reality, therefore, is that this is an unworkable provision. It is a facade, a pretence and a deceit. The Committee should not support such hypocrisy.

Mr. McGrady: Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the debate, Mr. Lord.

The right hon. Members for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) and for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) have given a series of vivid descriptions of the violence that continues to be perpetrated in our community. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall said that those of us who live in Northern Ireland have greater personal experience of the tragedy of that violence. I have visited the scenes of murders by both loyalist and republican paramilitaries and their offshoots—whatever name they may use—seen the bodies, and visited those maimed and the families of victims. I have seen those things within miles of my home and throughout my constituency.

One of the major driving forces behind the Belfast agreement is the desire to eradicate from our community that type of violence. The second is the desire to set up structures by which we shall be better governed in ways that affect the economic and social aspects of life, our standard of living and our way of life. In my view, those two main pillars have been the thrust of the agreement, and they are the reason why it is so important that it is sustained against the onslaught of those who oppose it for their own moral, political, party or personal purposes.

No one ever pretended that, on a given day, at midnight, a key could be turned by which the violence of a quarter of a century would be immediately turned off. Any sensible person knows, and would anticipate, that elements of violence would continue, sometimes perhaps orchestrated, sometimes individually perpetrated. We could not have come through 25 or 30 years of the most extreme form of personal violence without being left with a legacy in the shape of those who, having perpetrated acts of violence, are conditioned to do the same again when they are thwarted by events.

I fear that, in a debate such as this, personal vendettas and grudge bearing, both of which exist, and inter-paramilitary strife—which exists, and has expressed itself in violence from time to time—may be seen as a reason to topple the very delicate series of structures that the two communities have put together and approved. It is important that we do not play party politics with every incident that occurs and every act of violence that is perpetrated in our community. Such incidents will happen, but we must be assured that violence in all organised aspects ceases forthwith, and that the ceasefires that were laid on the table before the agreement was signed are sustained and continued.

5.45 pm

We have heard the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) and others talk about Sinn Fein being debarred because it is inextricably linked with the IRA. My understanding is that Sinn Fein can be barred only if it is inextricably linked with the IRA, which is organisationally continuing to perpetrate violence. That is

entirely different from what has been said. Much of the debate, especially from the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), has not been—

Mr. John D. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McGrady: I will not give way.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman mentioned my name.

Mr. McGrady: I am sorry; I did mention the right hon. Gentleman's name. I give way.

Mr. Taylor: As I pointed out earlier in the week and today, Her Majesty's Opposition, the Secretary of State and the Dublin Government have all said that the IRA is inextricably linked with Sinn Fein. Will the SDLP say the same?

Mr. McGrady: I regret that I made a mistake in mentioning the right hon. Gentleman. Although I shall reply to his question, I was referring to what the right hon. Member for Strangford said—[HON. MEMBERS: "He is the right hon. Member for Strangford."] I am sorry; I meant the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney), who made much of the semantics of the words "inextricably linked" and made the point that it is not a bar to holding office for a political party to be inextricably linked to a paramilitary organisation, be it republican or loyalist. However, the party would be debarred if that paramilitary element continued violence, and broke the ceasefires that it subscribed to.

The hon. and learned Member for North Down argued that we must be careful not to interpret individual acts of violence—which we must have, unfortunately, as a hangover of 25 or 30 years of violence—[HON. MEMBERS: "Must?"] I say "must" in the logical sense that such acts are going to happen. People have been desensitised to many of the norms of group behaviour and many aspects of observance of the law. We shall be unable to re-establish the validity of good conduct throughout our community—at least to the level of communities that have not had the violence that we have had—until we have had a time of peace, a time of working together and an opportunity to produce, for the benefit of the people, some of the fruits of that work.

Many contributions to the debate have been attacks on other parties, such as the Ulster Unionist party—the favourite target of the hon. Member for Belfast, East, for obvious reasons. I remind the Committee that the Democratic Unionist party and the United Kingdom Unionist party withdrew from the talks many months before the agreement was signed. It ill behoves them now to criticise other people who signed the agreement, when they did not even engage in it. Why criticise it now? Why were they not there, criticising, and making the amendments that they are advocating today?

On, I think, Monday night and again earlier this evening, the hon. Member for Strangford—the right hon. Member for Strangford; I have the nomenclature right on this occasion—challenged me, as did the hon. Member for Belfast, East, on the attitude of the SDLP. Let me make it clear, as I did on Monday night, although I do not think that the right hon. Member for Strangford was in his place at the time, that we will subscribe totally and completely to the letter and spirit of the agreement that we have signed up to.

That means, and I cannot state it any clearer, that any party—of course, they refer only to Sinn Fein—who is engaged in violence for the furtherance of a political purpose will not receive our support for office in that Assembly. Can anything be clearer than that?

Mr. John D. Taylor: The more the hon. Gentleman gets involved in this subject, the more he convinces me that one should vote against the Bill. Will he repeat what the Secretary of State has said—that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked? I am not asking him to condemn violence or to run away from the subject. Will he just answer that one question: are they inextricably linked?

Mr. McGrady: I have no hesitation in subscribing to that view. My party leader said many, many months ago that the IRA and Sinn Fein were one and the same. He said it publicly. What is the mystery? Why has it been brought up now? The right hon. Member for Strangford Gentleman certainly prevaricates in a mischievous way, one day supporting the agreement, the next day opposing it by innuendo, but perhaps he will settle down some time and be either committed to it or against it.

Mr. Winnick: Is it not a fact that, since the terror campaign begun by the IRA, the SDLP has been, almost on every occasion, totally opposed to those terrorist activities? Have not SDLP activists in Northern Ireland been targeted time and again, and has not the record of my hon. Friend's party been, from the beginning, one of total commitment to constitutional democratic politics and total opposition to terrorism?

Mr. McGrady: I thank the hon. Member for his helpful and supportive intervention. I did not say that in response to the criticisms from the other side of the Committee, simply because it is a fact that is well known and does not require constant repetition from me or any other member of my party. We have had members who have been killed, blown up, maimed, assaulted, burned out or stabbed to death. We have never, by word, deed, policy or statement, on any occasion encouraged or supported violence. In fact, our total stance for 25 or 30 years has been to fight it, not just in the media, but on the streets of our communities and villages and at election times, when we did it time and again.

When most other people were keeping their heads below the parapet, it was my party that kept faith with democracy and non-violence. In the long run, although it is now criticised for some reason, that led other people who were engaged in violence out of that violence and into the democratic process, in the hope that we could eradicate that violence once and for all from our community.

That is what this Belfast Good Friday agreement is about. As I said, one of the twin pillars is to ensure that violence and the gun are taken out of Irish politics once and for all, after hundreds of years of revolution, rebellion and violence. That other pillar is to promote the economic and social well-being of our people, because they do go hand in hand: we cannot have one without the other.

[Mr. McGrady]

However, I warn the Committee not to expect that, in the community that we have created, if you like, in Northern Ireland over the past 30 years of violence, intolerance and desensitising to the horrors of violence, we can magically at 12 o'clock on some appointed day turn off all violence. I would love that to happen, but I am not so stupid as to believe it will. That is why we have to be careful not unnecessarily to drive people who have been cajoled, coaxed and brought from violence to peace, back into violence. That is vital.

I say to the Committee again, so that I will not be asked the question again, that my party and I will support the Belfast agreement to the letter and spirit of the law. If any party is associated with violence, we will dissociate from it in relation to participation in ministerial position.

I could extrapolate on this, but I do not want to. We have a phrase in Northern Ireland: "what aboutery". One person says one thing, and another comes back by way of argument with, "What about . . . ?" I could refer to Drumcree, and politicians who were there.

Violence occurred at Drumcree. A machine gun was used against the police at Drumcree. Blast bombs and steel darts were used. I was not there, but certainly other Members of this House were. Are they associated with that violence? I am not going to make that judgment. I am going to have to wait for the judgment of the police, security forces and the rest as to whether a party is inextricably linked with an act of violence, not with an organisation of violence. Then, rightly, the agreement, in spirit and law, must be applied.

The amendment is restrictive, because the simple language already in the Bill is all-embracing and does reflect, as the hon. Member for Belfast, East and the right hon. Member for Bracknell have quoted, paragraph 25 of the agreement, which states:

"Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means".

That is all-embracing, and that is what the Bill is saying. In fact, the agreement goes much further, and makes it a condition of office that the pledge of office be faithfully and fully implemented.

The Bill goes even further, which causes me concern, although I have not tabled an amendment on it. It states that the Assembly may resolve that a Minister no longer enjoys the confidence of the Assembly "for any other reason". That is all-embracing for persons or parties. I draw the Committee's attention to clause 23, which says that individuals can be debarred not only for their personal act, but for the acts of their party. That is clearly stated. That has not been highlighted in some of the debate that we have had so far.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East said that he went up and down Northern Ireland saying that Sinn Fein, as he said, although I am sure that he meant anyone else, could not be removed from office if its members were found to be guilty of participation and association with an act of violence. Clause 23 clearly states that there are several mechanisms by which they can be removed—by the Assembly, by the Secretary of State and by the Presiding Officer, with cross-community support. There are at least three mechanisms by which a Minister can be removed from office.

Mr. Robert McCartney: I think that the hon. Gentleman misquotes the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), who is not in his place. The hon. Member said that the Unionist community could not have those people either excluded or removed from office because of the requirement for cross-community consensus. If that cross-community consensus were not made available by the SDLP, they would remain. That is the point he made.

Mr. McGrady: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes his valid point. I heard what I heard, but I am subject to that correction. I will certainly read *Hansard* in the morning, because it was said on two different occasions this evening. On one occasion, it was certainly said that, if these people are put in office, they cannot be removed. There was no qualification as to by whom and by what mechanism.

Ministers who are appointed and who contravene the spirit and the law of the Belfast agreement can be removed under clause 23 by the Assembly, by the Presiding Officer, and by the Secretary of State acting through the Presiding Officer. Those are three clear mechanisms and they can be brought into operation by saying that those persons did not use only democratic and non-violent means. Paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) of subsection (1) give the broadest possible reasons for such mechanisms to be applied and voted upon.

6 pm

I understand the intent of the right hon. Member for Bracknell in his amendment, and I understand what lies behind the amendment of the hon. Member for Vauxhall. However, in a real way the provisions in those amendments are totally embodied in the general descriptions in subsection (1). If we were to move away from that general description, I would be fearful of restricting the rights of the Assembly, the Presiding Officer or the Secretary of State, and of circumscribing their actions.

I feel, without feeling very strongly, that we should leave the clause as it is. It is all-embracing and would deal with a catch-all situation that we might not anticipate tonight, but which may arise in the months ahead. I am inclined to leave the Bill as it stands.

Mr. Öpik: As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman does not object in principle to the general content of the amendment. What would we lose by the additional clarification that the amendment would provide?

Mr. McGrady: Amendment No. 15 states that we should leave out lines 28 and 29 and insert the five paragraphs. Those five paragraphs are specific, whereas what would be removed is general. The general is always better than the specific. The right hon. Member for Bracknell and the hon. Member for Vauxhall rightly drew attention to decommissioning, punishment beatings and other aspects and attributes of violence, but they are all there in the terms of the agreement. Although I understand the reasoning and the sentiment behind them, I believe that the amendments would restrict the ability to deal with matters not specifically mentioned.

Mr. Hunter: I want to speak primarily to amendments Nos. 15 and 16. Many of the salient points have already been made, not least by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) and there is no reason to

revisit them. In passing, I must say how strongly I agree with the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). I want to re-express one of her points in my own way. We are so heartily sickened by Northern Ireland's sectarian violence and so earnestly yearn for it to end that there is a danger that we will suspend our critical faculties and, like automatons, support any measure or gesture that purports to promote peace. There is a danger in so doing that we will defeat the objective.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) has returned to the Chamber. I listened carefully to his speech, and I want to make my main points in reply to his arguments. He said—I paraphrase—that we should not, could not, must not or cannot legislate outside the agreement. My arguments in support of amendments Nos. 15 and 16 comply with the remit that the hon. Gentleman wishes to impose on the debate. I do not agree with him that we must not, could not, should not, or cannot legislate outside the agreement. My understanding of the triple lock is that Parliament has a proactive role in the process and has every right to interpret and implement the agreement. However, that is not my main point.

I recognise the imperfection and inadequacies of amendments Nos. 15 and 16. They were pointed out by the hon. Member for Belfast, East. However, I believe that the amendments are a distinct step in the right direction, and I shall argue that they are entirely consistent with the agreement. They arise essentially from the same arguments as those put by Conservative Members during the debate on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. I cannot really understand why the Government will not accept them. I will clarify and enlarge on that point.

Mr. Winnick: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that he is against the agreement and that he voted, as he has every right to do, against the Bill on Second Reading?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yes. I have never sought to conceal that. It is irrelevant to the amendment, but my opposition to the agreement is on public record.

Amendments Nos. 15 and 16 consist of five unnumbered paragraphs. The essential point is that all those unnumbered paragraphs are entirely consistent with the spirit and the letter of the agreement. The first unnumbered paragraph reflects closely and is a re-expression of clause 23(1)(a). The second unnumbered paragraph is as near as possible identical to subsection (7)(b). The third paragraph is a re-expression of subsection (7)(c) and the fifth paragraph is virtually identical to subsection (7)(d). We immediately establish in four of the five paragraphs of the amendment that there is no difference in degree or kind from the content of the Bill as it stands.

The one area in which the amendments introduce a novel dimension is in the fourth paragraph. We need to compare that paragraph with paragraph 3 of the section entitled "Decommissioning" on page 20 of the agreement. I defy any hon. Member to say where that paragraph differs in substance, significance or meaning from paragraph 3 of the decommissioning section in the agreement. This is the issue on which many Conservative Members had difficulty in understanding the Government's opposition to a comparable amendment to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill just a month ago.

We are tabling amendments that are entirely consistent with the spirit and the letter of the agreement as interpreted by the Government in the Bill and in the agreement itself. I do not believe that our argument was answered adequately by the Government during the debate on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, and, like many other hon. Members, I look forward to what will be said today.

Reduced to simplicity, amendments Nos. 15 and 16 are consistent with the agreement and comply with the requirements demanded by the hon. Member for Walsall, North and, within the hon. Gentleman's remit for the debate, they cannot be rejected.

There is a second basis of argument for my belief that the amendments are essential. I pick up a point made by the hon. Member for Belfast, East, and perhaps made also in an intervention by the hon. and learned Member for North Down. It is a generally agreed fact that very many Unionists voted yes in the referendum because of their understanding, and the media's reporting, of what the Prime Minister said on two visits to Belfast—one on the Thursday just over a week before referendum day, and the other on the day before polling day. There was also the handwritten note, and the letter that he wrote, which was published in the *Irish News* and the Belfast *News Letter*. I should like briefly to concentrate on that letter.

The Prime Minister's letter appeared in those two major Northern Ireland newspapers on the morning of referendum day. He wrote:

"Representatives of parties intimately linked to paramilitary groups can only be in a future NI government if it is clear that there will be no more violence and the threat of violence has gone.

That doesn't mean just decommissioning but all bombings, killings, beatings and an end to targeting, recruiting and all the structures of terrorism."

The Prime Minister continued:

"I have set out the tests for this. They will be enshrined by law and these tests will be applied".

That is what the Prime Minister said. However, the perception remains that he and the Government have yet to deliver on that pledge.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Those such as myself—perhaps lawyers—accustomed to the language felt that the Prime Minister's pledges had as many holes as a colander. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the undoubted intention of the pledges was to persuade the electorate of their substance, regardless of the escape clauses with which they were festooned?

Mr. Hunter: I very strongly agree with the hon. and learned Gentleman that that is indeed the case. If one analyses extremely carefully the Prime Minister's quoted words, one realises that they equate with neither the media presentation nor the general public's perception of them.

A point that I have made more than once is that the media presentation and public perception of those words were public matters—published in the press—and that the Northern Ireland Office did not issue any statement of correction or denial. Unwittingly, I have no doubt—I must be charitable—it perpetuated and enhanced the misunderstanding.

I come to the end of the argument that I want to present. First and foremost, amendments Nos. 15 and 16 are consistent with the agreement and with the Government's

[Mr. Hunter]

interpretation of the agreement as presented in the Bill. Secondly, the Government have still to account for the perception and the reality of the Prime Minister's as yet unfulfilled pledges.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I affirm my own total and unequivocal opposition to violence in politics within a democracy—in case any Committee member wishes to ask me about my position on the matter. In fact, I am so opposed to such violence that I should include in my definition of it not only life-threatening actions but intimidatory or insulting behaviour within a political body that might silence those who have a view to express. That definition should express the fulness of my commitment to anti-violence. I am not a recent convert to that view, but have held it throughout my political life.

The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) expressed my own thoughts so well that I have curtailed my speech, and will add only a few further thoughts.

If the words of clause 23 did not fit the agreement, I am quite that Ministers would themselves have tabled amendments for debate today so that the words fit the agreement entirely. As they have not tabled such amendments, I can only presume—as I have not been involved in the talks that arrived at the agreement—that the Bill's words fit the agreement.

This debate has lasted for the best part of three hours, and it is interesting that the violence committed by only one quarter has been mentioned. Let me say—having expressed my total opposition to violence of any kind—that it is interesting that only violence committed by the nationalist side of the equation has been mentioned, except when the hon. Member for South Down, correctly, said that he was opposed to violence from any quarter, nationalist or Unionist.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Robert McCartney: Is the hon. Lady aware that the reason for concentration on what might be loosely called "republican" violence—as opposed to so-called "loyalist" violence—is that, under the d'Hondt principles, the only representatives inextricably linked with violence who have any prospect of becoming a Minister in the Executive are those associated with republican violence? However, I am sure that every Committee member will endorse her sentiments—with which I should like expressly to be associated—about opposition to violence of any kind.

6.15 pm

Mrs. Fyfe: I am aware of the d'Hondt principles, but let me continue with the point that I was making.

Opposition Members would have done their case more credit if they had been even-handed in their references to violence. We have, after all, only in recent weeks seen extreme violence at Drumcree. Can it be the case that not a single person aiming missiles at police and the Army is a member of any political party? Perhaps that is so. However, if any person taking part in the violence was a member of a party, I wonder what that party is doing about expelling that member? It cannot be taken for granted that that party is totally opposed to violence if it ignores a member behaving in that manner. Although I certainly do not know for certain, it is hard to credit that not one of those engaged in that extreme violence against our own police and Army has membership in any political party.

I agree with another point made by the hon. Member for South Down—about how senseless it is to expect that violence will totally stop. South Africa, for example, would still be in the throes of apartheid if, on both sides, its people of good will had not been willing to come together and acknowledge that extremists on both sides would regard some actions of people on their own side as a sell-out and refuse to accept them. We have to try to move forward, and the Bill is a part of it.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Fyfe: I shall continue.

Far greater risks come from not supporting the Bill. I was really worried when I heard an Opposition Member—whose constituency I forget, but we are colleagues in the Council of Europe, and we agree on so many things—say that he is now dubious about the Bill. I am seriously worried about that.

Committee members have criticised what they consider to be the loose terminology of the phrase "any other reason", which is mentioned in two parts of the Bill. The phrase is all-inclusive, and could mean any type of violent activity. If one is going to object to someone on the grounds of only one particular aspect of violence, we will be back to an exercise of, "What about?" Human ingenuity can create endless ways in which to act violently or to intimidate others. Should the Bill contain an endless list of every form of violence that anyone has imagined? Of course not. The phrase "any other reason" has therefore been included in the Bill, so that the Assembly itself can act as it sees fit in each case.

Mr. MacKay: I know that the hon. Lady would not want deliberately to mislead the House, and I shall help her put the record straight. I made it clear in my opening remarks that I condemned all violence, and I mentioned the number of paramilitary punishment beatings as well as the number of IRA punishment beatings. The hon. Lady was present for Second Reading on Monday, and heard me condemn what had happened at Drumcree and elsewhere. I suspect that she was also present last Wednesday during Northern Ireland questions, when the same condemnation was made. At no point, have I or any member of my party been anything but even-handed in our condemnation of terrorism, violence and intimidation.

We are now discussing the Assembly, however. As the hon. and learned Member for North Down said, there is only one paramilitary party that, under the d'Hondt principle, could possibly take ministerial office, and that is Sinn Fein-IRA. Inevitably, we have had to concentrate on that.

Mrs. Fyfe: I missed the opening sentence of the right hon. Gentleman's speech, so he possibly made that reference then, but it was not in my hearing. I apologise if I have misrepresented what he said, but I find—I am sure that *Hansard* will show me to be correct—that most of the debate has been about violence from one side.

Opposition Members are talking about the current situation, but we are talking about creating an Assembly which, we must surely hope, will last for many years, so the same issue could arise in future in respect of a member of some other group, Unionist or nationalist. My point is that it is perfectly reasonable to retain the words "for any other reason" in the Bill, because that allows the widest possible interpretation of what the Assembly itself could decide was unacceptable conduct. To return to my earlier point, I would even include in the term "any other reason" intimidatory behaviour in the Chamber.

Mr. Öpik: I am sure that the hon. Lady agrees that one of the biggest problems in this debate, and, one can predict, one of the biggest problems of the Assembly's actions in regard to violence, is likely to centre on interpretation. How does the hon. Lady feel about what I presume to be the intention behind the amendment, which is to specify as much as we can in order to reduce the element of subjectivity—and, more to the point, the vagueness—which could cause enormous dispute within the Assembly itself?

Mrs. Fyfe: I thought that I had dealt with that point. If we were to attempt to include every possible activity that could be counted as a violent act, the Bill would have umpteen pages, and still leave something out. It is better to leave the words "for any other reason", so that the Assembly has the authority to act on what it finds unacceptable.

I hope that what I have said has contributed to the debate. It is important to get behind the Bill, and behind the agreement. We all know what will happen if they should fail.

Mr. Donaldson: Government Members, especially the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), have referred many times to those of us who oppose the agreement. The referendum is over, lest the hon. Gentleman has not noticed. The people of Northern Ireland voted for the agreement, and that is why we are discussing the Bill. The hon. Gentleman seemed to be saying that any issue that we raise is invalid because we oppose the agreement. I hope that that is not the case, but he keeps asking the same question and one wonders what his motive is.

We are dealing specifically with the issue of the holding of ministerial office. It is important to focus on that aspect of the clause, because some of the contributions today have ranged very widely.

For the benefit of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe), let me make it clear that my colleagues and I have always opposed terrorist violence, from whatever quarter it comes. When I was 18 years old, I joined the Ulster Defence Regiment, part of Her Majesty's security forces, to fight terrorism. I had the option to join the Ulster Volunteer Force, but I am opposed to paramilitary, terrorist violence and went out to defend the community against all forms of terrorism and paramilitary organisations. Let the hon. Lady be in no doubt that my colleagues and I oppose terrorist violence from wherever it comes.

Let us understand what we are dealing with. The only terrorist organisation with political representatives in the Assembly that is eligible to hold ministerial office is the IRA. That is the reality. The UVF's representatives—the Progressive Unionist party—secured only two seats in the Assembly, so they would not be eligible for ministerial office. The Ulster Democratic party, representing the UDA, had no one elected to the Assembly and has not the remotest prospect of holding ministerial office. The only organisation eligible to hold ministerial office is the IRA, and we are focusing on that because the clause deals with the holding of ministerial office. I hope that the hon. Member for Maryhill understands why that has been the focus of our attention. We have to deal with the reality.

The IRA has the prospect of holding ministerial office in the Northern Ireland Assembly—and I mean the IRA, because many of the members of Sinn Fein who have been elected to the Assembly are senior members of the Provisional IRA. The hon. Members for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams) and for Mid-Ulster (Mr. McGuinness), who do not take their seats in the House, are both acknowledged publicly to have been in the past, if they are not at present, members of the army council of the IRA. Those are the very people who are about to become Ministers in the Government of Northern Ireland. Let us understand the reality of the situation.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I understand my hon. Friend's argument, but does he accept that the legislation would cover any party or any person engaged in violence? Therefore, it is not aimed at any particular party or person, although I understand my hon. Friend's argument in the context of the current situation.

Mr. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course, the principle applies to all paramilitary and terrorist organisations. We believe that the provisions in this Bill, like those in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill, are inadequate. They do not define clearly the requirement for paramilitary-linked political parties to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. I know that Labour Members say that the agreement and the Bill state that people holding office should be committed to peaceful means, but there must be some accountability. There must be some means of holding people to that commitment. Our view is that the Bill's provisions are inadequate for holding people to account. That is where I am coming from.

I was present during the talks that led to the agreement. I was present because I wanted a fair and honourable agreement that provided the basis for a way forward for Northern Ireland. I voted against the agreement because of the situation that we are discussing now. I am not prepared to accept as Ministers in the Government of Northern Ireland people who are members of the IRA army council—members of an organisation which has not given up violence for good.

What we have is a ceasefire from the IRA. It was breached at the weekend by the murder of Andrew Kearney. It was breached by the beating of Vincent McKenna, and it has been breached on numerous occasions since it was brought into effect. It is not a permanent end to violence; nor does it represent a commitment to exclusively peaceful means. Those who hold ministerial office should be committed to peaceful means, and the organisations to which they are linked must demonstrate that in a tangible form before people become eligible to hold ministerial office. I object to the

[Mr. Donaldson]

Bill because it contains nothing that would prevent representatives of Sinn Fein-IRA from becoming Ministers in the Government of Northern Ireland.

6.30 pm

I understand that the Secretary of State will lay before the House next week an order specifying the organisations that will benefit from the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill by having their terrorist prisoners released early. It will be interesting to discover what she does—whether she specifies that the Provisional IRA will benefit from the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill in the aftermath of the murder of Andrew Kearney and the beating of Vincent McKenna.

That will be the first test of the commitment of the Government and the Secretary of State to hold those organisations—including the Provisional IRA—to the commitment to exclusively peaceful means. We shall see whether the Government have the courage to take those people on and hold them to account or whether, when it comes to the test, they will do what they have done in the past, and will no doubt do in future, and fudge the issue and walk away. The prisoners will be released, the murderers will walk on to the streets early, and representatives of Sinn Fein-IRA will hold ministerial office.

There are transitional arrangements in the agreement to cover the period between the establishment of the Assembly following the election on 25 June and the transfer of power from Parliament to the Assembly. The transitional arrangements include provisions for shadow Ministers. Paragraph 35 of the agreement refers to

"those . . . serving as shadow Ministers".

Even before the provisions of the Bill can be implemented, representatives of Sinn Fein-IRA will be entitled to be appointed as shadow Ministers. So what will happen on the transfer of power? Schedule 14 states:

"Any nomination of a person to hold a Ministerial office made before the appointed day shall on and after that day have effect as if it had been made under section 15."

In other words, when representatives of Sinn Fein are appointed as shadow Ministers without any of the provisions of the Bill and the so-called safeguards in it coming into effect, they will automatically become fully appointed Ministers. So how can we prevent them from taking up office? How can we hold them to the commitment to exclusively peaceful means?

The only real provision is for a cross-community vote in the Assembly. The three options set out in the Bill to exclude people from office require the passing of a vote in the Assembly based on cross-community support. In effect, that gives a veto to one political party in Northern Ireland—the SDLP. Will the SDLP ever vote to remove Sinn Fein-IRA from office? That question was posed to the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), but he has not yet answered it. It was also posed to the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) and he has not yet answered it.

What are the circumstances in which the SDLP will vote in the Assembly to have Sinn Fein-IRA removed from office? I do not believe that it is in the interests of Northern Ireland or in the interests of the agreement—even though I opposed it—and the workability of the institutions established by it to leave one political party to decide whether Ministers who are linked to an organisation that is engaged in violence should continue to hold office. If that continues to be the only effective mechanism whereby those people can be excluded from office, I do not believe that the agreement or the institutions created under it will work effectively or properly.

Mr. John D. Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a precedent in the attitude of the SDLP at the talks at Dublin castle? He will remember that we went there for a week, but the talks never took place because the IRA had committed an offence just the day before. The question arose whether Sinn Fein representatives should be expelled from the talks, and the SDLP was against their expulsion.

Mr. Donaldson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right. On the one occasion when the SDLP was put to the test on the exclusion of Sinn Fein from the talks, on the basis that the IRA had breached the Mitchell principles, it opposed the expulsion of Sinn Fein.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman inform the Committee what was the punishment for the deaths of two Roman Catholics? Two of its own co-religionists were murdered and it was proved that they were IRA killings. What punishment did Sinn Fein receive?

Mr. Donaldson: I can answer that. The punishment was two weeks' expulsion from the talks process. It was one week for one murder. That was the penalty, and it was opposed by the SDLP. What confidence can I or the people of Northern Ireland have in the mechanisms in the Bill that provide that people who breach the commitment to peaceful means will be removed from office? I am afraid that I have no confidence in those mechanisms.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): We have had an extremely important debate—possibly one of the most important debates during our consideration of the Bill in Committee. It partly, but not completely, mirrors the debate on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. The circumstances are different and we are considering a different law, but some of the points that were made in respect of that Bill were made in respect of this one, too.

I fully acknowledge the importance and seriousness of the issues that reflect real concerns not just of right hon. and hon. Members, but of very large numbers of people who live and work in Northern Ireland.

I also understand the point made by the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay). I know that he is fully committed to the agreement and its success. I am grateful to him for his kind words. I do not know whether he knows everything that I know, but I admire the fact that he spoke in the spirit of the agreement that he and I support.

I accept that those who did not support the agreement spoke with complete sincerity on the basis that we need to address the issue. We have partly done so in this debate. I hope to answer a number of points that have been raised, and to make some points of my own.

The debate is set against a backcloth of appalling violence and civil unrest in the past three weeks in Northern Ireland. There has been violent disorder, disgraceful attacks on the forces of law and order, and the deaths of three young boys. Many right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the dreadful beating of Mr. McKenna and the murder of Mr. Kearney. Of course, the Government join all right hon. and hon. Members in utterly condemning such murders and so-called punishment beatings which, as a number of hon. Members have said, have no place in a civilised society. A vigorous police investigation into Mr. Kearney's death is under way. The RUC is pursuing the possibility that the murder was carried out by the Provisional IRA. We await the outcome of those investigations.

It is important to consider the issues in the context not just of what has happened in the past three or four weeks, but of what has happened since the referendum. The issues were rightly raised during the referendum campaign. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister sought to respond to those concerns carefully, responsibly and within the terms of the agreement. He clarified them in his speech at Balmoral on 14 May. Clause 23 reflects what the parties negotiated in the agreement and what the Prime Minister promised during the referendum campaign.

The details of the clause are important, but we must not lose sight of the fundamental principles underlying the agreement. The first is set out in paragraph 25 of strand 1, which says:

"Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office".

As my right hon. Friend said in his Balmoral speech:

"Those who have used the twin tactics of the ballot box and the gun must make a clear choice. There can be no fudge between democracy and terror."

Rev. Ian Paisley: Is the Minister saying that what the Prime Minister said was not outside the terms of the agreement?

Mr. Murphy: The Prime Minister clarified the agreement during the referendum campaign. He made it clear what he, as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, believed to be the case on the agreement. Taking all the responsibilities of his office, he assured people of the issues to which I have referred.

The second fundamental principle of the agreement is that the new institutions of government in Northern Ireland are open to all those who share a common commitment to democratic and exclusively peaceful means. As the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said when he addressed the first meeting of the new Assembly:

"We are not saying, and we have never said, that the fact that someone has a certain past means that he cannot have a future. We have always acknowledged that it is possible for people to change."

The third fundamental principle is that the agreement stands or falls as a package. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said at Balmoral:

"The agreement is what has to be implemented in all its parts."

There can be no cherry-picking. The agreement was negotiated by the parties and was approved overwhelmingly by the people of Northern Ireland. Our task is to implement it fairly and fully.

That means that we must work to implement all the elements of the agreement—those that benefit us and those that are uncomfortable for us. We have listened carefully to the arguments, but we cannot accept proposals that call those fundamental principles into question.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: It is clearly the responsibility of Members of Parliament to stand by the side of the victims—those who are still being intimidated and beaten up, and those who have been killed. The actions of paramilitaries are directed at generating publicity and public reaction—local or national. Our job is to try to ensure that the publicity and the public reaction work against them. Will the Minister make it clear how we can turn the temperature up so that those who might exclude themselves by association with continuing violence will say so openly, or stop the violence so that there are no more victims?

Mr. Murphy: That is achievable in the context of the clause. Our overriding task is to give effect to the agreement. Paragraph 25 says:

"An individual may be removed from office following a decision of the Assembly taken on a cross-community basis, if (s)he loses the confidence of the Assembly, voting on a cross-community basis, for failure to meet his or her responsibilities, including, inter alia, those set out in the Pledge of Office. Those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office under these provisions."

That paragraph makes some fundamental points: any decision on exclusion from ministerial office is for the Assembly; such a decision must be taken on the basis of cross-community voting; the relevant grounds are any failure to meet the Minister's responsibilities; and, in particular, those grounds include any breach of the commitment in the pledge of office required of all Ministers, to

"non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means".

The clause reflects each of those elements. It is right that the grounds for exclusion emphasised in subsections (1) and (2) reflect the agreement's emphasis on the use of only democratic, non-violent means and embrace other breaches of the pledge of office.

6.45 pm

I understand the thinking behind the amendments, but I cannot accept them, because they would replace or add to the grounds for exclusion set out in subsections (1) and (2), which closely reflect the terms of paragraph 25 of strand 1 of the agreement and the accompanying pledge of office, with other tests and criteria, however well meant or sensible. To do so, would be to move away from the specific terms of paragraph 25 of strand 1. I am confident that the wide grounds available under the clause fully meet the requirement of the agreement that those who do not use only democratic and non-violent means should be excluded from office.

I cannot accept the amendments tabled by the Democratic Unionist party, because they would remove the requirement for cross-community support, which is a key element of the agreement, repeated twice in paragraph 25.

We have set out to give effect to the promise of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his Balmoral

[Mr. Murphy]

speech to give legislative expression directly and plainly to the factors that he set out. The Prime Minister's starting point was:

"The Agreement is what has to be implemented in all its parts."

That is also the starting point of the clause. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

"In clarifying whether the terms and spirit of the agreement are being met and whether violence has genuinely been given up for good, there are a range of factors to take into account".

The four factors that he set out are in the Bill. He said:

"Those factors provide evidence upon which to base an overall judgment—a judgment which will necessarily become more rigorous over time."

Subsections (6) and (7) provide for the Secretary of State to reach such an overall judgment, taking into account the four factors that the Prime Minister set out. The Secretary of State can then communicate her opinion to the Assembly and require it to consider whether to exclude someone from ministerial office. However, the final decision is for the Assembly. That is vital to the agreement.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Is it not a waste of time for us to be here considering the Bill in Committee if everything must be exactly as set out in the agreement? Does that not show that this Parliament, which is supposed to be sovereign, has to give way to an agreement? If this is a sovereign Parliament, we have the right to put forward amendments, which the Minister should consider on their merits, rather than being stuck with an agreement that appears to be set in stone, like the laws of the Medes and the Persians.

Mr. Murphy: I do not know too much about Medes and Persians. The people of Northern Ireland were clear about what they wanted. They voted for the agreement by a large majority in the referendum. The fact that we have spent the past three hours debating just one clause of an 82-clause Bill shows that our time has not been wasted and that the House of Commons is an important place for such discussions. Indeed, in the next 15 or 20 minutes, we shall doubtless be voting on whether we should accept the clause.

It is no surprise to be faced with amendments very similar to those tabled to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. They fall broadly into two groups. Some propose new factors, and some seek to turn the factors from ones leading to an overall judgment to ones leading to four separate tests or hurdles. Some try to do both. Of course, we listened during proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill. As the Committee will know, the factors were changed and improved as a result of those debates. In particular, factor (d) was expanded, at the urging of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann, to make it clear that there must be full co-operation in implementing the decommissioning section of the Belfast agreement. I cannot accept amendments that would add to the factors set out by the Prime Minister. Nor can I accept those that turn the factors into separate tests. As the Prime Minister said:

"We are not setting new preconditions or barriers."

Of course gaps must be filled. In answer to the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson), another reason why the House of Commons must debate such matters is precisely that there are gaps to fill. In places where the agreement is silent, we, as a House of Commons, must legislate. We have in all events to follow the spirit of the agreement. The agreement is silent on the length of any period of exclusion, for instance, so we have inserted a 12-month period of exclusion. Additionally, there is provision in the Bill to exclude parties. There could also be breaches that give grounds for exclusion that are not personal, but have to do with party policy or the position of the party as a whole. In such cases, it would be nonsense to exclude one Minister, only to see him or her replaced by another from the same party who, for exactly the same reason, would be in breach of his or her responsibilities.

I have received representations from hon. Members, particularly those representing Northern Ireland, regarding the phrase "for any other reason". Indeed it must be rethought. We shall be consulting parties during the next month or two before the Bill goes to the other place to see whether we can make an acceptable change to that part of the clause. A number of the concerns expressed come down to this: the provisions in the clause sound fine in theory, but will not be used in practice; they will prove ineffective. If so, the Prime Minister has made it clear that we shall support changes to make the provisions effective.

I assure the Committee that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will take her responsibilities extremely seriously. Where she considers that a genuine issue arises on whether a party or an individual has breached the fundamental commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means, she will act to ensure that the Assembly considers the issue. She will, of course, closely consult security advisers, particularly the Chief Constable. She will particularly take into account not only the activities of an individual or a party, but those of any paramilitary organisation to which an individual or party is clearly and inextricably linked in a relationship of support.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) referred to cases that have arisen in recent weeks. If it is found that the murder of Mr. Kearney may have been carried out by members of the Provisional IRA, the Secretary of State must take that factor into account during her deliberations. All such matters can be taken into account only by her, because she receives the proper advice from the Chief Constable, the security forces and others.

Then—this is the essence—the matter will be relayed to the Assembly, which can discuss it if one of three triggers is used. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister can initiate a debate; the Assembly, with its 30 Members, can ask for and initiate a debate; or the Assembly can be obliged to debate a matter if my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State so writes to it as a result of the four factors to which I have referred. Those factors are to be taken in the round by the Secretary of State as an indicator of whether there is a genuine commitment to non-violence and to democracy.

Ultimately, it is and must be the Assembly which has control over such matters. I am responsible to the House of Commons as a Minister; an Assembly Minister is responsible to the Assembly. That is a very important concept, which the Assembly must take into account.

I simply repeat that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has indicated—my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has, too—that, in the event of this not working properly, we shall have to look at it again, when that time

comes. Of course, I hope that that time will never come. I also hope that the right hon. Member for Bracknell will feel inclined to withdraw his amendment.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The Minister has said that he is answerable to this House and, therefore, for its decisions. What would he say if a majority of Tories, rather than a majority of his own party, was required to keep him in office?

Mr. Murphy: I should be a very lucky man.

Mr. MacKay: On behalf of the Opposition, I cannot guarantee that we would keep the Minister in office, much as we admire him.

I have listened carefully to the Minister's very reasonable response, but I regret to say that I am still convinced that we would be right to press our amendment to the vote. The Prime Minister clarified the agreement on the Floor of the House on 6 May and subsequently in his Balmoral speech. Our amendments are within the scope of the agreement. They would strengthen the working of the Assembly. Given a background of violence, punishment beatings and—so far—no co-operation with the decommissioning commission, it is in the interests of the House and of the Assembly that the amendments are agreed.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 144, Noes 272.

Division No. 347] **[6.56 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*

Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John McFall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

It being after Seven o'clock, THE FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN *proceeded to put the Question necessary to dispose of proceedings to be concluded at that hour.*

Question agreed to.

Clause 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr. Peter Robinson: I beg to move amendment No. 71, in page 7, leave out lines 13 and 14.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 72, in page 7, line 15, leave out 'Two candidates standing jointly', and insert 'Candidates'.

No. 73, in page 7, leave out lines 26 to 28.

No. 99, in page 7, line 27, leave out from 'otherwise' to end of line 28 and insert

'the Secretary of State may by Order permit the other to continue in office for not more than seven days.'.

No. 141, in page 7, line 27, leave out from 'shall' to end of line 28 and insert

'hold office as a caretaker for up to three months pending the election of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister'.

No. 74, in page 7, leave out lines 29 and 30 and insert—

'(7) Where the office of either the First Minister or the deputy First Minister is vacant, an election shall be held under this section to fill the vacancy.'.

No. 142, in page 7, line 29, after 'Where', insert 'either'.

No. 143, in page 7, line 30, leave out 'to fill the vacancies'.

Mr. Robinson: The amendments are probing, as the Minister will recognise. It is remarkable that the principal

position in the Assembly Executive will be held jointly. Will the Minister say whether there are any circumstances in which the First Minister can act independently of the Deputy First Minister? I see none.

Paragraph 9 of schedule 12 states:

"A reference to—

(a) the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland; or

(b) the chief executive member,

shall be construed as a reference to the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly."

There was a Prime Minister in the old Parliament in Northern Ireland and a Chief Executive under the power-sharing arrangement. Under the Bill, however, two people must at all times act jointly, but what will happen when it is physically impossible for them to do so?

It seems as though the First Minister and his deputy are joined at the hip; I doubt whether they can even go to the water closet without each other. The system seems most unworkable. Is the Minister prepared to add provisions to the Bill to allow the First Minister some independence, so that, at some stage, he can be his own man rather than the prisoner of his deputy?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I draw the attention of the Committee to amendment No. 99, which I tabled because I believed that the Bill contained a flaw: it does not provide for what would happen if—I hasten to add that I do not want this to happen—either the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister died in office. There is a problem about what would happen in what I call the interregnum between the expiry of the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister and the election of a successor. The Bill requires the Assembly to provide for the election of a replacement under its Standing Orders.

7.15 pm

If either the First Minister or Deputy First Minister dies, the other one no longer holds office and, I believe, the Ministry will fall or be in paralysis. Clause 18 states:

"The executive power in Northern Ireland shall continue to be vested in Her Majesty . . . As respects transferred matters, the prerogative and other executive functions of Her Majesty shall be exercisable on Her Majesty's behalf by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly."

I invite the Committee to consider that, if there is no First Minister or Deputy First Minister, power cannot be conveyed to subordinate Ministers, who, under clause 18(3), derive their functions from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister acting jointly.

We must be sensible and provide for what would happen if the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) or their successors were suddenly to lose office—most likely by dying, although I hope that that does not happen. Northern Ireland needs a continuing Government; I do not have to remind the Committee that a lapse of Executive authority even for a few hours could be catastrophic. If either of the offices was vacant, it would clearly take some days for the vacancy to be filled under the Standing Orders of the Assembly.

Amendment No. 99 would allow the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister to continue in office for seven days—that would allow the Ministry to continue. I shall be interested to hear whether my hon. Friend the Minister believes that my contention is legally flawed. I do not think it is; I think that the flaw in the Bill is the problem.

If my suggestion of extending the power of the surviving office holder by seven days does not commend itself to the Minister, I hope that an amendment will be tabled in another place to provide for a list of automatic succession so that, if a vacancy occurs, a named or designated postholder in the Ulster Unionist party or the SDLP would click in for long enough to allow the parties to regularise the appointment.

I do not want to labour the point, although the matter does need to be resolved in Committee. The Minister may say—as was said to me sotto voce a couple of nights ago—that the matter is provided for in the Assembly Standing Orders. With respect, I do not believe that it can be—no matter how those Standing Orders are drawn up, a vacancy cannot be filled instantly. The vacancy may occur while one of the office holders is on holiday in another part of the world. Nevertheless, at that moment, the other Minister falls and, I believe, the whole Ministry will fall or be paralysed, as its powers derive from the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

I hope that my amendment commends itself to the Minister. If not, I would like an undertaking that this void or flaw in the drafting of the Bill will be remedied in another place.

Mr. Trimble: The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) makes a good point. It is, as he says, very much a Committee point, and there is a certain sense of relief at getting down to some real Committee points in this Committee. It is a pity that we have the ghastly programme which does not give us time to look at all the Committee points in the Bill. However, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in his contention.

The way in which the exercise of Executive functions is provided for in the Bill is a mess. All I can say in defence of the draftsmen is that the hon. Member for Thurrock should have seen the earlier draft—it was a worse mess. I do not know how many more drafts there will be, or how long it will be before we get something that is workable. However, what we have at the moment has clearly not been thought through, and some provision has to be made.

I am not sure that the absence of a Government is truly catastrophic. There is a lot to be said, in certain circumstances, for minimal government. There is a tendency for those in government to think that they should always be doing things.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Like giving themselves decent holidays.

Mr. Trimble: I am certainly thinking of the holidays which I hope to have within the next few days, and which I hope will be decent.

The seven-day continuation contained in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Thurrock is inappropriate. If either the First Minister or Deputy First Minister resigns, we have a crisis. There might be a different situation if either stepped in front of the proverbial bus. Some of the police officers on duty here have reproved me for jumping off buses before they stop,

[Mr. Trimble]

but that is by the way. If there is a resignation, we will have a crisis. It is optimistic to assume that that crisis will be resolved that quickly.

That is why our amendment contains the provision for the survivor, if I can use that term, to continue on a caretaker basis for a period. Using the term "caretaker" in the Bill may be inappropriate, and the draftsman may wish to reflect on that. The amendment suggests a period of three months, but that is just picking a term. That matches with the provisions in amendments that we have tabled which we shall debate later.

If there is a resignation—and therefore a crisis within the Administration which may or may not be resolvable—we could have a deadlock. Something will have to be done to resolve the deadlock, and the obvious thing is to provide for an election. However, we are dealing with a body with a fixed term. While there might be circumstances which might precipitate an election—or in which an election becomes inevitable—it should not be an easy option.

If it is an easy option, that undermines the concept of a fixed-term Assembly, and it becomes an Assembly with a maximum term of four years which can be terminated earlier than that. We need a period so that people are under some pressure to try to find a way of resolving the crisis. Amendments Nos. 141, 142 and 143 deal with that situation, but there is a need to provide for a vacancy and for Executive functions to be discharged on a better basis.

I have said to the Minister that the best way to do that is to follow what is done in the Government of Wales Bill, where Executive functions are vested in the Assembly as a whole. We then provide for those functions to be exercised in accordance with standing orders in the Assembly as a whole to reflect the fact that we will not have in the Northern Ireland Assembly a Cabinet or Executive bound by collective responsibility.

We are not analogous to Scotland. We will have a looser form of Administration and vesting the matter in the Assembly, subject to it being exercised in accordance with standing orders, preserves the safeguard for minorities which exists with the need for standing orders to be approved on a cross-community vote. We will deal with the problem flexibly, but we must still take account of the need to protect minorities.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) made some points in a characteristic fashion, and he had a substantial point. Repeatedly in the Bill, functions are conferred on the First Minister and Deputy First Minister jointly. As has been made clear, the Bill's purpose is to carry into effect the agreement, and it is important that we stick to the agreement. I defy anyone to find in the agreement any significant functions that are to be exercised in the way envisaged in the Bill. A couple of minor functions are to be exercised jointly by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, but general governmental functions are not.

The hon. Member for Belfast, East made a useful point, but he chose the wrong clause on which to make it. The election of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is the clearest point in the agreement. The agreement says that that is to be done jointly. It is consistent with that principle that the death or resignation of one should call into question the position of the other. We then have to look at the practicalities of providing for the continuation of the Administration and for re-election. However, the basic principle—that, as the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have been elected jointly, the survivor cannot continue indefinitely if there is a death or resignation—is clearly right. That it is clear in the agreement.

I believe that my amendments deal with the practicalities better than the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Thurrock. However, the Minister may have a better way, and we wait to hear what he has to say. The practicalities have to be dealt with, but the general point raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, East must be addressed. As I said on Monday, it seems to me that, every time the draftsman encountered a difficulty, he decided to dump it on us. That is not appropriate. I would prefer to dump it on the Assembly as a whole.

Dr. Godman: I was struck by what the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) said about the two roles seeming to be "joined at the hip", and I listened carefully to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), who referred to the First Minister in the Welsh Assembly.

I would like to ask Ministers a question. Paragraph 18 of strand 1 of the agreement says:

"The duties of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will include, inter alia, dealing with and co-ordinating the work of the Executive Committee and the response of the Northern Ireland administration to external relationships."

The term "inter alia" can be used liberally.

Let us put away such terrible things as people falling under buses. What happens if the First Minister is absent from Northern Ireland? Can I assume that the Deputy First Minister takes on the role in his absence? If any emergency arises, would he have the right to deal with everyday matters and any critical matters that might arise?

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann mentioned the Welsh Assembly, but I wish to refer to the Scottish Parliament. Clauses 42 to 44 of the Scotland Bill provide for the appointment and term of office of the First Minister and the Ministers, and that is entirely different from what is proposed here.

The right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Belfast, East have raised critical questions, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). Can I assume that a deputy would deputise and take on the role of First Minister in his colleague's absence? It might be worth looking at the appropriate clauses in the Government of Wales Bill and clauses 42 to 44 of the Scotland Bill, which may provide the means by which those questions can be answered sensibly and democratically.

Mr. Öpik: First, I must echo the practical concerns about what would happen should one of the positions become vacant. The Northern Ireland Assembly is not comparable with the Welsh Assembly, and the difficulties are not the same. In the former, indivisibility is there for a purpose, and a sensible purpose at that. As the agreement is absolutely clear, we do not need to debate that matter. As the right hon. Member for Upper Bann elucidated, we are discussing a practical question and, far from decoupling the two positions, we want to maintain some continuity should one or other of the individuals disappear from the role.

7.30 pm

Can the Minister give us some assurance that continuity in the event of a vacancy will be considered during the summer, perhaps as a drafting amendment? One thing is sure: if a crisis leads to the resignation of the First Minister or Deputy First Minister for whatever reason, that crisis would be exacerbated if both roles became vacant at once. The intent of the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) is to prevent a crisis from deepening because of poor planning for the continuity of the two roles.

Mr. Robert McCartney: I shall be brief. Much of the difficulty arises because of the looseness of the terminology. To describe as First Minister and Deputy First Minister the roles designated to the two Executive officers is a misnomer. Clearly, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) is in no sense the deputy of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). They are joint consuls, as in imperial Rome, each with the power to stop the other.

Mr. Trimble: Like Rome perhaps, but not imperial Rome.

Mr. McCartney: We will leave Caligula and Nero out of it for the moment and concentrate on the consuls rather than the emperor.

Mr. McNamara: And the hon. Gentleman is one of the vestal virgins.

Mr. McCartney: I do not think so. As the father of four children, even in a male sense I do not think that there is any justification for that remark.

The concept of a deputy is that, if the principal is, for any reason, unable to discharge his functions, the deputy will assume the executive role of the principal. In the Assembly, the deputy would immediately have to leave office should anything happen to his principal, and vice versa.

The terminology is indicative of the louche way in which the Bill has been drafted. It is meant to feed the Unionist electoral majority with the idea that, the leader of the largest party is in some way a First Minister and the leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour party—the second largest party—is in some way a deputy. That is the image that the language is intended to project, which is completely out of kilter with the essence of the provisions.

We talk about introducing democracy, but there is no democracy as it is popularly understood in the arrangement. Such is the distrust, or mistrust, that, if one of the joint consuls is incommoded in any way—whether by falling under a bus, or becoming of unsound mind, memory or understanding—the whole thing is scuppered. It is unreal nonsense.

Mr. Trimble: I hope that what I am about to say is accurate and I am sure that I will be corrected if it is not, but I think that the hon. Gentleman will be relieved to know that there is no provision to remove either Minister on the basis of his being of unsound mind.

Mr. McCartney: I am prepared to accept the right hon. Gentleman's assurances, but the test may ultimately become objective rather than a subjective demonstration of any weakness of the mind.

The issue is that the language used in the Bill in no way reflects the reality of the situation. Some people would say that it is another manifestation of the Government's obsession with making form much more important than substance.

Mr. Paul Murphy: This has been an interesting debate and I shall deal with one of the least contentious points first. Hon. Members referred to the prerogative powers mentioned in clause 18, which are a tiny proportion of all the powers. Ministers will continue in office with full powers. In that case, prerogative powers merely encompass public holidays and a few other specialist powers.

Mr. Mackinlay: I hesitate to intervene, but although I think that I understand what prerogative powers are, clause 18(2) also mentions

"other executive functions of Her Majesty",

and it would seem that everything and anything that a Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly does is derived from that subsection. With the greatest respect, I hope that the Government will reflect on that.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Minister if I am wrong, but it seems to me that, if both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister posts are vacant, Ministers will be denied the capacity to exercise their statutory functions, and there would be paralysis in the Administration. They might say, "That's only convention. We can skip over that." However, any actions that they took, or that were taken on their behalf, in the interregnum would then be subject to the vulnerability of challenge in the courts.

Mr. Murphy: The vast majority of Ministers' powers derive from statute and not from clause 18. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will deal with the later clauses and may be able to elaborate on that. The points about vacancies are important, and I will deal with them in a moment.

On the more general aspects of the First and Deputy First Ministers, I must admit that it is not the most elegant of language, but that is what was decided in the talks and in the agreement and that is what people voted for. As for the concept of having a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, to reflect the top parties' electoral mandate and success in the Assembly elections—effectively, the largest nationalist and the largest Unionist party as reflected in membership of the Assembly—that effectively means that co-operation and consensus between the two traditions in Northern Ireland are reflected in those offices. That was one of the great attractions of the whole agreement. Of course there were contentious issues, but I think that hon. Members who were involved in the referendum campaign will agree that that issue did not exercise people or cause controversy, because it is a good idea in itself.

Of course, the arrangement is nothing like a joint presidency. I know the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister well, and I do not have the slightest doubt that they will exercise their independence in many circumstances, but the idea of having those two Ministers was in the agreement, and I believe was supported by those who voted in the referendum.

Mr. Robert McCartney: The Minister has made constant reference to what people agreed to in the

[Mr. Robert McCartney]

referendum, but he knows well that the focus groups ordered by his Department produced some important information about the number of people who had read the agreement, the number who had read it completely and the number who had only skimmed through it. To suggest that every word of it was endorsed in the referendum is a flight from reality.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. and learned Gentleman would not disagree that, when people elected him to represent North Down in the House of Commons, they did not read his manifesto carefully. When they voted for him, they voted for what was in that manifesto, just as the referendum was based on what was in the agreement. The Government cannot construct a Bill based on an agreement on the assumption that people did not read it.

The concept of having a First and a Deputy First Minister representing the two largest parties—effectively, the largest Unionist and the largest nationalist party—was an attractive concept that people liked, and it was written into both the agreement and the Bill.

Mr. Peter Robinson: It was neither in the agreement nor in the Bill. Anyone can be nominated. Candidates do not have to be from the largest party of either designated tradition. Two Unionists could be nominated.

Mr. Murphy: Yes, of course, but that was not the reality, and everyone knew that it would not be. The agreement is based on co-operation between both traditions, and if that had not been the case, the referendum majority would not have been as big as it was.

There are areas in which the First and Deputy First Ministers must act jointly, according to the agreement, but other areas are not so significant. When we have further consultations here and in another place, we will be able to examine those areas carefully.

Some valid points have been made about vacancies, by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and others. We need to have another look at that part of the clause, and in the summer I will consult the parties in both Northern Ireland and Westminster, with a view to adding some clarification in another place. I hope, as a consequence, that the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Peter Robinson: My purpose was to seek a list of those occasions when the First and Deputy First Ministers could act independently. I did not get one suggestion from the Minister as to any such occasion. I suppose that the only circumstance in which they could act independently would be if they were to take another ministerial post in the Executive, which of course they would be entitled to do. It is perfectly clear that the two of them must at all times act together. The amendment raised the issue and will let people see that we have, effectively, joint First Ministers in Northern Ireland, and that each is a prisoner of the other. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 5 agreed to.

Clause 15

NORTHERN IRELAND MINISTERS

7.45 pm

Mr. Trimble: I beg to move amendment No. 144, in page 7, line 41, leave out from first 'the' to end of line 42 and insert 'Assembly'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 145, in page 8, leave out lines 1 to 3.

No. 178, in clause 16, page 9, line 13, leave out 'of the Assembly'.

No. 147, in clause 18, page 9, line 30, leave out from first 'the' to the end of line 34 and insert 'Assembly'.

No. 77, in clause 18, page 9, line 30, leave out

'and the deputy First Minister acting jointly'

and insert

'with the approval of the Assembly voting on a cross–community basis in accordance with section 4(5).'.

No. 78, in clause 18, page 9, line 32, leave out 'those Ministers so determine' and insert—

'the First Minister so determines, with the approval of the Assembly voting on a cross–community basis in accordance with section 4(5),'.

No. 149, in clause 22, page 10, line 38, after 'policy', insert

', the initiation of legislation, the approval of secondary legislation and such other matters as may be provided by Standing Orders'.

No. 184, in clause 40, page 21, line 24, leave out

'First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly'

and insert

'Assembly'.

Mr. Trimble: The amendments give us the opportunity to continue the debate that was conducted under the previous group, as largely the same issues are involved.

The agreement contains some novel features, which are there to reflect the particular circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland. That is why we have the concept of both a First and a Deputy First Minister; there is symbolic importance in having two persons who are, by virtue of the arrangements in the agreement and in the Bill, closely related to each other.

There is no need for the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) to make such heavy weather of that. The same arrangements apply when coalitions exist: if there are two parties whose votes are necessary to provide an effective majority in an institution, the two party leaders are not necessarily in a very close relationship. In its essence, there is no great dissimilarity between such a situation and the situation provided for in the Bill.

My concern is that the Bill's draftsman has departed significantly from the agreement and given some precise functions to the First and Deputy First Ministers that are not given, or even hinted at, in the agreement. The agreement provides for them to be elected jointly, and that is clearly a joint function. It also provides that they are to preside over the meetings of the Executive Committee.

Paragraph 18 of strand 1 says:

"The duties of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will include . . . dealing with and co-ordinating the work of the Executive Committee and the response of the Northern Ireland administration to external relationships."

Co-ordinating is a general function, rather than a precise executive function.

The only precise executive functions given in the agreement to the gentlemen in question is with regard to the civic forum in paragraph 34 and, under paragraph 2 of strand 2, with regard to making alternative arrangements for representation, although, by virtue of paragraphs 13 and 18, they have to co-ordinate general arrangements for representation with external institutions. Their role is symbolic and co-ordinating. I think that the draftsman has made a mistake in giving them so many precise executive functions.

The disadvantage is clearly shown by the matters covered in amendments Nos. 144 and 145, which deal with determining the number and functions of Northern Ireland Ministers. That point was covered in the Assembly's very first sitting, at the end of which it charged the First and Deputy First Ministers with a role: to consider the shape and structure of future administration and the arrangements to be made for both the British-Irish council and the north-south ministerial council. There are certain matters that have to be dealt with in accordance with the agreement.

Rev. Ian Paisley *rose—*

Mr. Robert McCartney *rose—*

Mr. Trimble: I shall choose the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney).

Mr. McCartney: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. As I understand it, he objects to the fact that certain functions have been given to him that were not spelled out in the agreement, but is not the real charge that the function that the Assembly gave the two Ministers was not the Assembly's choice but the result of a fixed agenda presented to it by the Secretary of State? The Assembly did not choose what to do: it was told what to do.

Mr. Trimble: The Assembly chose to do it when the Assembly passed the necessary resolution. The agenda was drawn up by the Secretary of State, but she did it after consultation.

Rev. Ian Paisley: With whom?

Mr. McCartney *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Trimble: I cannot say. The Secretary of State consulted me, and I am sure that she consulted other people. The agenda did not appear out of the blue, but that is a peripheral issue.

At the end of its first sitting, the Assembly passed a resolution charging the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister with making studies, considering matters including the shape of the future Northern Ireland Administration, the British-Irish council and the north-south ministerial council, and bringing proposals to the Assembly, as we hope to do in the autumn. The Assembly will be able to debate those proposals, to amend them or to tell us to go back and think again. It may decide to ask for someone else's proposals. The decision rests with the Assembly, and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will merely offer proposals.

The practical reality underlying that is that the Assembly requires an effective majority if it is to function. As matters stand, and as we see them in the future, that majority will be provided by a form of coalition between the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Ulster Unionist party. If proposals to the Assembly are approved by the leadership of those two parties, it is likely that the Assembly will endorse them. The Assembly can also endorse proposals on a cross-community basis, as cross-community voting can be invoked in particular circumstances. The right way to proceed is to focus on the Assembly, and to create an effective majority in the Assembly, which will make us work closely together.

Clause 15 is the wrong way round. It says that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are to act together but without the Assembly to make a determination that the Assembly will have to approve. That puts the cart before the horse, suggesting that power rests essentially with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Their decision may be vetoed by the Assembly, but decisions will not be taken properly. The same point arises in a different context in relation to amendment No. 147.

The right way to proceed is to give the power to make a determination to the Assembly, with its ability to take decisions on a cross-community basis when that is necessary. To give too many precise functions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will tend to lead to a joint presidency, and that was not the intention of the agreement. We need the draftsman to rethink the clause to bring it closer to the agreement.

Dr. Godman: Clause 15 allows the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister jointly to determine the number of Ministers and their functions. Presumably, their determination will then be presented to the Assembly, which is a coherent and realistic approach. That is in effect Cabinet government, under a Prime Minister, and I expect the Scottish Parliament to work that way. The First Minister in Scotland may head a coalition Government, and he will have to negotiate who his Ministers are to be and what their functions will be before he presents his decision to the Scottish Parliament. Surely the same holds true for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Trimble: There is a clear difference between arrangements for Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Scottish arrangements are based on normal British parliamentary practice, so Scotland can have normal Cabinet government. If no one wins an overall majority, there may have to be a coalition, but there will basically be a normal British parliamentary system. That is not the case in Northern Ireland. The d'Hondt formula and the principle of proportionality will mean that there will not be a Cabinet. There will be an Executive, but it will not operate as a Cabinet.

I thought that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) was going to refer to the conflict between clauses 15 and 17. I have not tabled any

[Mr. Trimble]

amendments on that, not because I approve of it, but because my time is limited. Clause 15, even with my amendment, provides that the functions to be exercised by Ministers are to be determined by the First and Deputy First Ministers. That offers them the temptation to rig the d'Hondt formula's operation by moving functions between Departments so that all the politically sexy functions are in the Departments that they obtain. Perhaps they might even be tempted to manipulate the total number of Departments. Far be it from me to suggest that such ideas will be at the forefront of their minds, but they are exposed to that temptation.

That runs counter to clause 17, however, as it states:

"the Northern Ireland departments existing on the appointed day shall be the Northern Ireland departments for the purposes of this Act.

(2) Provision may be made by Act of the Assembly for establishing new Northern Ireland departments".

There is an existing power under subordinate legislation for the transfer of functions from one Department to another. That is not being abolished, and there is a consequent conflict between clauses 15 and the existing body of law.

My main point is that functions should be determined by the Assembly. I am not moving away from the concept of partnership arrangements in saying that it would be a mistake to give those functions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I am puzzled about why amendment No. 149 is grouped with amendment No. 144, because it raises quite different issues. It deals with the functions of committees as provided for in clause 22. The draftsman has not taken account of all the functions given to committees in the agreement, which are listed in paragraph 9. The draftsman could reconsider the clause to bring it into conformity with the agreement.

8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Tony Worthington): It is interesting to hear the views of the First Minister designate, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), in respect of the exercise of these powers. He is right to say that the agreement, in the remarkable time in which it did what it did, could not possibly have solved all the problems that relate to any Bill.

What we have been trying to do is to interpret the spirit of the agreement. In respect of the setting up of the Departments, we referred the matter to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, which is in fact what the Assembly did. That seemed to us to be a sensible way of proceeding.

The right hon. Gentleman says that the Assembly should do it, but the Assembly cannot do it en masse; it would then have to refer the matter to someone or to some organisation to accomplish that end. That is what has occurred. We are quite willing to look again at the issue, but that seems to be the sensible way to deal with the bringing into existence of the Assembly, its Ministers and its Committees. However, we shall reconsider the matter and see whether there is an alternative way to proceed.

I should clarify a point raised several times during this debate and the previous one, which is the question of prerogative powers. I assure hon. Members that the prerogative powers referred to are extremely limited, covering matters such as the organisation of the civil service, public holidays, action in civil emergencies, the honours list and so on. They sound like an enormous matter, but the powers are in fact marginal to the affairs of the Assembly. The bulk of the power that people will have is statutory power, which will go with Ministers in the carrying out of their duties.

To clarify another point that has been raised, so that it does not dominate our discussions later, I should explain the reference to "other executive functions". Again, that sounds like a major part of the work of the Assembly and of Ministers. It refers to the powers that the Government or a Department can exercise in the same way as a normal citizen; the best example of that would be the power to make contracts. However, the great bulk of the Assembly's powers will be statutory.

With the assurance that we shall look again at how we go about the business of setting up the Committees and the functions of the Assembly, I ask the right hon. Member for Upper Bann to ask leave to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Trimble: I am glad to hear that the Minister will look again at the matter. I trust that, in doing so, he will consult me and others who are directly involved. I realise that the Bill had to be drafted very quickly and that that limited the opportunity for consultation beforehand, but, had we been given the opportunity, we should have been very happy to elucidate for the Minister the real meaning of the agreement. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Peter Robinson: I beg to move amendment No. 163, in page 8, line 31, at end insert—

'(9A) If the number of seats in the Assembly which are held by members of one or more political party, reduce or increase, for any reason to such an extent that it alters the number of Ministerial offices entitled to be held by a party, then the procedure set out in subsections (4) to (9) shall be reapplied.'.

The First Deputy Chairman With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 164 in page 9, line 12, at end add—

'(16) In this section the number of seats in the Assembly which are held by the political party is determined by calculating the number of members designated as being in membership of that party when signing the Assembly register and a member of the Assembly may alter his party designation in the Assembly register.'.

Mr. Robinson: Again, the amendment is designed to give the Government an opportunity to clarify their thinking and the intention of the legislation in respect of possible changes in the numerical strength of political parties in the Assembly. Clearly, it can take only a few Members to require a change in the number of ministerial posts to which a political party is entitled. For example, a significant transformation could be achieved by a couple of extra DUP Members and the fall-off of a couple of SDLP Members—perhaps some SDLP Members will join the DUP.

Mr. McGrady: Me?

Mr. Robinson: Who knows? The invitation is there for the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady).

There is a clear possibility that a small shift in numbers would entitle a political party to an additional ministerial post, or require a political party to lose a ministerial post. The legislation, on the face of it, does not appear to deal with that eventuality. It is possible that the Minister will tell me that Standing Orders could deal with the issue, but I think that it is so important that it is necessary for it to be in the Bill, so that, expressly, if the number of seats in the Assembly held by a political party increased or decreased to the extent that it should cause a change in ministerial numbers, the formula outlined in the Bill in subsections (4) to (9) would be reapplied.

The second amendment, No. 164, deals with the determination of who is a member of a political party. Currently, that is self-evident: when Members went into the Assembly, they were asked to sign a register, one of the columns of which indicated the political party to which they belong. However, nowhere in the legislation does it say that that is the determining factor in deciding whether somebody is or is not a member of a political party; nor does the Bill say what happens if a person resigns from a political party. If a person resigns from a political party, does the party still hold to the number that it had when that person was elected as a member of that party? The Bill is silent on all those matters.

I have no doubt that, within four or five years, such problems will arise. It is proper that we face up to them now and amend the Bill to allow them to be dealt with in an efficient and effective manner.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I am sure that the Minister knows that, when we were registering, there was some controversy in respect of the Women's Coalition, whose members wanted to be one thing one day, something else the next day, and something else the day after that. There was a ruling against that by the pro tem Presiding Officer, the person appointed by the Secretary of State. They thought that they could be nationalists when they wanted to be nationalists to get the consensus vote; Unionists when they wanted to be Unionists to get the Unionist vote; and nothing when they wanted to be what they really were. That was what took place.

Mrs. Fyfe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rev. Ian Paisley: No. I am simply saying that that is what the members of the Women's Coalition told us they were during the talks. They said that they were nothing—not Unionist, not nationalist, just themselves. That is what they wanted to be sometimes, but when it suited their voting purposes, they wanted to be Unionists or nationalists. That was not permitted after the ruling from the chair, but what is going to happen in future when people want to change party?

What happens then, and when voting takes place? What happens if, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) says, Members resign from one party and join another? It could change even the Executive if two Members who had resigned from one party joined another party that needed only two more Members to get a third or a fourth seat on the Executive. What would happen then? I think that the Minister needs to be clear when he replies, and to tell us his thinking on those issues. Will he deal with those matters in the Bill?

I am glad that the House is now learning that the Bill cannot be a replica of the agreement. We have heard Members argue strongly today that the Bill can include nothing except what is in the agreement, but the Minister admitted that it would have to contain points that were not in the agreement.

Mr. Worthington: The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) must not take my appearance at the Dispatch Box as evidence of a new reasonableness.

We ask hon. Members to resist the amendments but to acknowledge that there is an issue to be considered. It is important, as we work through the implications of the d'Hondt procedure, that we think of all possible consequences. In the case that has just been mentioned, it would be wrong to deny Members the opportunity to cross the Floor. In any democracy, there are circumstances in which people wish to reclassify themselves, and it would be wrong for us to state in legislation that a person who was elected with a particular designation had to keep it for ever. We therefore resist the thinking behind the amendment.

I pay tribute to the people who have drafted the Bill. What has happened over the past few months is simply remarkable. I think of my background as a Member of Parliament for a Scottish constituency and how we have been talking about devolution all my adult political life. Devolution will happen in Scotland—there will be an election next May and the Parliament will sit a year later. We seek, in this Bill, to set up an Assembly in Northern Ireland by early next year. What we are achieving is remarkable.

I return to d'Hondt and the difficulties that we shall have to tackle later in the proceedings on the Bill which are linked to the points made by the hon. Members for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) and for North Antrim. What should happen if parties are excluded from the Parliament? Should we then return to the d'Hondt principles? What will happen when parties amalgamate? Again, there may be a need for recalculations.

Dr. Godman: I can understand the object of the amendment, but surely, if the legislation to set up a finely balanced Assembly cannot comfortably accommodate people who wish to transfer from one party to another, an alternative democratic view is that such Members should have the honour to resign and cause a by-election.

Mr. McNamara: My point follows that of my hon. Friend, with whom I disagree. The nature of the elections, which are based on a proportional system for the constituencies, means that communities within constituencies are represented. Therefore, if Members cross the Floor or change their position, they deny that community element the representation that it had within the complicated community and constituency-based system. That brings us to the question whether there should be a by-election at all or whether a person should, in those circumstances, resign and be replaced by another party member. There is a world of difference between an Assembly elected for a fixed period and proportional representation, and what happens in this House, where Governments can change if a vote of confidence is lost. That will never happen under the present Administration, I am happy to say.

Mr. Worthington: In his elegant way, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) has demonstrated the complexities that lie behind the

[Mr. Worthington]

amendment. Over the summer months, we need to work out the circumstances in which there would need to be a rerun of the d'Hondt principles. I am not committing myself to what those circumstances might be, but as we consider the Bill, it becomes clear that we need further to explore this matter. I ask the hon. Member for Belfast, East not to press his amendment, and I assure him that we recognise that the Bill needs further work in that respect.

8.15 pm

Mr. Robinson: I welcome the Minister's remarks. There was confusion in the debate between party affiliation and community designation. We are dealing with party affiliation in the formula for allocating ministerial posts. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) referred to the possibility of a community being robbed of one of its Members if he or she were to cross the Floor. It is unlikely that a Member would cross from the nationalist community to the Unionist or vice versa in the middle of an Assembly term, but it is theoretically possible.

The difficulty in sustaining the hon. Gentleman's argument is that we were not required, or indeed entitled, to state our community designation at the time of the election. I argued that every person who stood should then state their community designation so that people knew what that would be when Members entered the Assembly and could vote accordingly.

Mr. McNamara: How Jesuitical the hon. Gentleman is regarding the Alliance party. A Member may not necessarily cross the Floor from nationalist to Unionist or vice versa. There is the question of the separate non-aligned groups—if I may use that United Nations term—some of whose Members might join other organisations.

Mr. Robinson: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but under the Bill, a move does not have the same effect if Members remain within the same community designation. Most of the voting in the Assembly will be based on community designation, so if Members remain in the same community designation, it does not matter which group they sit with. The impact of changing from one political party to another principally has an effect on the number of ministerial posts that that party will have.

The position is not unlike that in this House. The hon. Member for Hull, North has colleagues who were elected as something other than Labour Members. It is not uncommon for Members of the House to change their affiliation without going to the electorate for a ballot.

Mr. McNamara: I take the hon. Gentleman's point about community designation, but there would be a problem if a Member moved from the Alliance party and declared himself nationalist or Unionist, depending on the particular brand of Unionism to which he became affiliated and how that affected the party balance under the d'Hondt system. The problem would still arise in that case.

Mr. Robinson: The hon. Gentleman would have a point if there was something to stop Members changing their community designation tomorrow if they so wished. As it is, they can go into the Assembly today and change their community designation. There is nothing to stop them.

It is entirely wrong that people can change their community designation overnight just for the sake of the voting impact that it may have in the Assembly. It makes a farce of the way in which the Assembly operates. However, until such time as community designation is tied down, the hon. Member for Hull, North does not really have a point, because the Alliance party members could change that anyway.

Mr. McNamara: We are not disagreeing.

Mr. Robinson: In that case, let us end the debate very quickly on that, by way of concord.

I am pleased that the Minister has undertaken to look at the matter again. In terms of the practical operation of the Assembly, it is essential that we look at it again. I shall examine the Government's response closely when we have it. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Mr. Peter Robinson: I beg to move amendment No. 76, in clause 16, page 9, line 16, leave out 'chairmen' and insert 'chairman and deputy chairman'.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 9, in clause 16, page 9, line 19, at end add—

'(4) Ministers of the Crown shall not serve on the Executive Committee'.

Mr. Robinson: I am slightly surprised that amendment No. 76 was chosen for debate, because it very much followed on from our earlier debate about the Siamese twins in the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Strangely, instead of being Chairman and Deputy Chairman, they become joint Chairmen. I wonder why we have that change in terminology. Earlier the Government were trying to bluff people into believing that we had a First Minister and a deputy, but the reality seems to emerge when they are chairing meetings of the Executive Committee as joint Chairmen. Will the Minister help us to understand how two Chairmen will preside over a meeting? Surely, if they are First Minister and Deputy First Minister, they should be Chairman and Deputy Chairman.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I should like to turn the Committee's attention to amendment No. 9, standing in the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends, which says that

"Ministers of the Crown shall not serve on the Executive Committee".

The issue is something of a hardy perennial. It was under discussion in the House only yesterday, in the context of the Government of Wales Bill and the ambition, in that

case, of the Secretary of State to fulfil, for a limited time, the roles of Minister of the Crown and Assembly First Secretary.

In the view of the Official Opposition, there is a clear constitutional issue, which applies as much to the position in Northern Ireland as it does to that in Wales and that in Scotland. The starting point is simple—the ministerial guidelines, of which the code for 1997 was published in July. The first guideline reads:

"Ministers must uphold the principle of collective responsibility."

To that is joined the second guideline:

"Ministers have a duty to Parliament to account and be held to account for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments and next step agencies."

Rev. Ian Paisley: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has heard the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) say that the Executive Committee is not a Cabinet. Surely the hon. Gentleman is quoting guidelines for Cabinet responsibility—that Ministers must agree, and that they must move in unison. Surely that is a Cabinet structure.

Mr. Grieve: I am quoting from the rules relating to United Kingdom Ministers. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are also guidelines which are set out in the Bill, and in the Belfast agreement, relating to Ministers in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In particular, schedule 5 of the Bill provides that it is the duty of a Minister

"to support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly".

Of course, in the Northern Ireland connection, the matter goes further, because in Committee today we have heard something about the curious relationship between the First Minister and his deputy. I do not use the word "curious" in a pejorative sense. I accept that we are putting in place a constitutional creation, but it imposes on the two people mutual responsibilities—and, indeed, loyalties—which are explicit, or at least implicit, in the context of the Bill.

The question arises—I accept that it is a hypothetical question at the moment—how could those two sets of guidelines, one for Northern Ireland and one for Ministers in the United Kingdom, be reconcilable with the possibility of a United Kingdom Minister holding a place on the Northern Ireland Executive, or vice versa? The view of the official Opposition is that the two are completely incompatible.

We could end up with extraordinary anomalies. How could a Minister observe collective responsibility to both bodies? We could also have the extraordinary situation of a Minister ending up supervising his own actions because, under clause 21(3)(a) of the Bill, it is possible for a Member of the Northern Ireland Executive Committee to act as the agent for a Minister of the Crown of the United Kingdom. We could therefore have the very bizarre situation of a Minister of the United Kingdom giving a delegated agency task to himself in another guise.

This may appear to be somewhat esoteric, but it is not. I shall explain to the Minister and the Committee why I do not believe that it is. There is already ample evidence that, where one has devolved administrative structures—let alone devolved structures relating to assemblies and government—conflicts can arise.

I have to tell the Minister that, only a very few years ago, I was sent up by a Government Department to a port on the north-east coast of England to pick up the debris of a prosecution that had been brought by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, England, against a Scottish trawlerman. In the course of the proceedings, it had become apparent that the directives under which he was acting, which had been placed upon him by the Scottish branch of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, differed markedly from those that were being operated in the port in Lincolnshire where he had landed his catch.

The result was a disaster for the Government Department that had brought the prosecution—perhaps rightly so, because it was castigated for the inconsistencies that existed. The fact remained that, because there was, at least, a doctrine of collective responsibility, the fall-out—to which I was not privy because I was there only in the role of advocate—could at least be contained within the Ministry, in the relations between the Scottish Minister, holding his collective responsibility and his responsibility to the House, and the English Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, with his responsibilities in relation to his own Department.

Even with the limited—but important—powers that will be devolved under the Bill, a fisherman coming out of Ardglass, fishing in the Irish sea and landing his catch at Fleetwood might easily encounter an identical problem if the rules were interpreted differently in Northern Ireland and in England. In those circumstances, it would be the clear duty of those holding Executive office in Northern Ireland and those who were Ministers of the Crown of the United Kingdom to resolve that difficulty; and its resolution, in terms of collective responsibility, is incompatible with one person operating in both bodies at once.

When the issue was discussed in the House of Lords, in the Welsh context, it was suggested that there was no reason why the Bill should not go ahead, because, if the Prime Minister wanted to appoint as a Minister of the Crown a person who happened to be a Member of the Welsh Assembly, he should not be fettered from doing so, and vice versa. However, it is an anomaly which creates its own problems from the moment that it comes into being. The Committee should—and I hope that the Minister will—have the courage to accept that, in this context, and especially in the Northern Ireland context in view of the unusual relationships that will exist within the structure of the Northern Ireland Assembly, that anomaly should be prevented from the outset.

Mr. Worthington: Amendment No. 76, which is in the name of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), follows a familiar theme of the Ulster Democratic Unionist party. Basically, we are simply following the agreement. Strand 1 of the agreement states:

"The Ministers will constitute an Executive Committee, which will be convened, and presided over, by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister."

We feel that this clause and the way in which it is drafted is consistent with the agreement's intentions. All we are doing is honouring the agreement. I do not want to go any further, because I would simply repeat what has been said many times tonight.

8.30 pm

Similarly, as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has recognised, this other issue is a hardy perennial that has come up over and again during the devolutionary year. I do not want to repeat points that were made in debates on the Scotland and Government of Wales Bills, but we take the same position on this as on those other Bills.

If the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) were to take up a ministerial post, we would not want to exclude him from the Executive Committee, but the argument of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield is even more exotic than anything else that has come out tonight. In fact, it is not a hardy perennial, but the most tropical and fragile of plants. We take the same position on this as on the devolutionary Bills on Scotland and Wales. We do not think that we should deal with what are fanciful situations that will not occur.

Northern Ireland Ministers must be Members of the Assembly. It is unlikely—I put it no more strongly—that Members of the Assembly will be Ministers of the Crown, but we do not feel that it is necessary to block that possibility.

Mr. Peter Robinson: I am at a loss to understand the reasoning of the Minister, who refers to paragraph 17 of the agreement to support his contention that there should be joint chairmen. Paragraph 17 says:

"The Ministers will constitute an Executive Committee, which will be convened, and presided over, by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister."

Clearly, it does not say that they should act jointly, act together or act at the one time. There is no reason to believe that they have to be either joint chairmen or that they have to act together at the same moment in chairing a meeting. The Minister is reading too much into the agreement. Nothing in the agreement is inconsistent with the amendment that has been tabled in my name.

I ask the Minister to look at the matter again. I think that he has gone beyond the agreement unnecessarily and I hope that he will report back at a later stage. In the meantime, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 17 to 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20

INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

Mr. Trimble: I beg to move amendment No. 148, in clause 20, page 10, leave out lines 12 to 15.

This is, I hope, quite a small point. The aim of the amendment is to elucidate the meaning and situations that the Government have in mind with regard to this clause.

The clause gives the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland a power unilaterally to revoke legislation that is made by a Northern Ireland Department of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It gives that power to the Secretary of State in two situations. I find one acceptable—the one in which the legislative enactment in Northern Ireland contains a provision that is incompatible with the United Kingdom's international obligations.

However, I have difficulty in understanding the second provision. It gives the Secretary of State power to revoke legislation that is enacted by the Northern Ireland Assembly and that the Secretary of State considers

"would have an adverse effect"

on other legislation as it applies to excepted matters.

I should like the Minister to explain precisely what is meant by "an adverse effect". In what circumstances is there likely to be a situation that would justify the Secretary of State, in a remarkable action, unilaterally revoking the legislation of another body? That should be done only where there is clearly good reason for so doing. I am concerned about the apparent breadth of that phrase "adverse effect".

Mr. Worthington: As the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) will know, we have three categories of legislation: excepted legislation, transferred legislation and referred legislation. In some circumstances, the Secretary of State may also give permission for the Assembly to legislate on areas that have been reserved. Again, we will have to look at this issue, but the thought here is that there may be circumstances in which legislation passed by the Assembly under its transferred powers has an impact on the Secretary of State's reserved powers or under the excepted powers.

Here is an example that has been given to me. The Assembly might introduce legislation on road transport, which might have an impact on the activities of the security forces. We are not talking here of conflict. We are talking just about the interface between different sorts of legislation and different sorts of powers.

This issue is still being visited under clause 54 of the Scotland Bill; it is clear that we need to be clearer about what is the relationship between different sorts of powers. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendment, because we will need to revisit the issue at a later stage to clarify the relationships between those three sorts of powers, and to ensure that there is compatibility between those powers and clarity between the different Assemblies and Parliaments.

Mr. Trimble: I am glad that the Minister is thinking of looking again at the matter to achieve some clarity. That is precisely what I was seeking. I hope that we will have uniformity with the equivalent arrangements in Scotland, which, I regret to say, I have not had the opportunity to study, but I will endeavour to do so. On that basis, I am happy to withdraw the amendment, and I beg to ask leave to do so.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 21

AGENCY ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN UK AND NI DEPARTMENTS

Mr. Grieve: I beg to move amendment No. 13, in clause 21, page 10, line 31, at end add—

'(5) Arrangements under this section between the Government of the United Kingdom and a Northern Ireland department shall be known as concordats.

(6) The Government of the United Kingdom shall not enter into a concordat unless a draft of the concordat has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(7) Northern Ireland departments shall not enter into a concordat unless a draft of the concordat has been approved by the Assembly, by such procedure as standing orders may determine.'.

This is a probing amendment, but it seeks some answers to another hardy perennial topic that arose in relation to the devolution debates on Scotland and Wales. It is concerned with concordats. It is no criticism of the Government—I am trying to be fair—to say that, because of the way in which the Bill has been introduced, we have not had a White Paper in the accepted sense. Therefore, we have not had any detail about the arrangements that will be arrived at for dealing with devolved matters between the United Kingdom civil service and the Northern Ireland civil service.

In the two White Papers on Wales and Scotland, we were appraised of the existence of the delightful new concept called the concordat. The concordat is extremely nebulous, because it is not a legally binding agreement. It is usually signed by officials, and it deals with administrative co-operation and the exchange of information. Some concordats may not even be published if they touch on confidential matters which it is not thought to be in the public interest to disclose.

There is nothing in the Belfast agreement about concordats. Indeed, the agreement is, inevitably, short on the detail of how the devolved Assembly and the relationships in devolved Government will be made to work. Unfortunately, it is perhaps an inevitable feature of the discussion of this Bill—the Under-Secretary and the Minister of State have accepted this—that, because we have been so concerned with certain key issues relating to deeply held political convictions, we are in danger of not providing proper scrutiny of the detail on which, ultimately, the legislation is just as likely to trip up and founder as on the grand perspective.

I should like to ask the Under-Secretary what is being considered in clause 21 as it stands. I have the explanatory memorandum which deals with agency arrangements—I accept that agency arrangements and concordats may not be one and the same thing. Certainly, agency arrangements would seem to imply that there will be arrangements for the discharge of functions in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland civil service and Ministers on behalf of United Kingdom Ministers or the United Kingdom civil service.

If that is all there is on this topic in the Northern Ireland Bill, where are concordats to be raised and dealt with? I shall be surprised if the Under-Secretary, when replying to this amendment, says that there will not be concordats. It seems inherent in the way in which devolved government works that concordats there will be.

I have in front of me the document placed in the House on Thursday 26 February 1998 relating to the operation of concordats in Scotland—a similar document was placed in the Library in relation to Wales. Is it the Government's intention to do likewise in relation to concordats for Northern Ireland? If there are to be concordats, that raises an important issue that will need to be debated at some point during the passage of the Bill, because the principle of concordats raises enormously difficult problems about accountability.

There is a suspicion—the suspicion grew as I considered this matter during the passage of the Scotland Bill—that concordats were a mechanism for the exercise of control from the centre over the peripheral parts of the United Kingdom to which devolution was to be granted. The concordats were to be the facilitators for exchanges between civil services which might otherwise have divided loyalties as to who were their masters. It appeared to be a way of circumventing that which had no statutory basis whatsoever.

I am mindful that this is a probing amendment, and that the question of agency arrangements in clause 21 may not be the same as concordats. However, I hope that, during the debate, the Under-Secretary can at least enlighten us a little further on how the system will operate and what concordats will be brought into being to govern the relationship between the United Kingdom civil service and that part of it which will be operating solely on behalf of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

8.45 pm

Dr. Godman: I will be brief. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) had the grace to say that this was a probing amendment. It seeks to give a legal basis to the term "concordat", which is a concept that the hon. Gentleman described as nebulous.

Of course, in all sorts of areas, arrangements will have to be made, not just between Belfast and London, but between Cardiff and London and Edinburgh and London, and, indeed, between all four locations. Fisheries are an example of an area where joint decisions have had to be made.

Mr. McNamara: I am sure that my hon. Friend would not want to underplay his case. With the Council of the Isles, we will have Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man to consider.

Dr. Godman: I know my hon. Friend of old. He has a vice—that is what it is—of anticipating what I am about to say. I was about to come on to the Council of the Isles.

I believe, as does my honourable and equally old Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), that the Council of the Isles may well have to examine the arrangements for what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield called concordats. My hon. Friends will not be surprised to hear me using the fisheries issue as an example. I promise not to dwell on that for long, but you will not allow me to anyway, Sir Alan.

The issue of agreements is extremely important. It may be that the agreements entered into by the various assemblies and parliaments may one day require legal underpinning, but not by the nebulous idea raised by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield.

Mr. Grieve *rose—*

Dr. Godman: If I may just continue.

Under the clause as it now stands, perhaps arrangements established between the United Kingdom and a Northern Ireland department as described in the clause will be examined at meetings of the Council of the Isles or at meetings of officials, as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield suggested en passant.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman will be aware from his detailed participation in the Scotland Bill that this

[Mr. Grieve]

matter caused considerable concern. The Opposition took the view that, if there were to be concordats, they should be subject to affirmative resolution, or at least approval by the House and by the Scottish Parliament. We believed that to be necessary if they were to be the underpinning arrangements for administrative contact to smooth the wheels and machinery of the operations of state. That was in a Scottish context.

In the Northern Ireland context, we do not know whether there are to be any concordats, because no one has told us. However, I would be surprised if there were not to be concordats. If there are to be concordats, we would repeat our view that they should be subject to affirmative resolution by the Northern Ireland Assembly and this Parliament. That is how we approach the matter, because we are constitutionalists on this—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We are in Committee, and that is a very long intervention.

Mr. Grieve: I leave it to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) to reply.

Dr. Godman: Thank you for rescuing me, Sir Alan.

The very helpful notes on clauses points out that clause 21 provides for

"agency arrangements to be between UK Ministers of the Crown and Government Departments, on the one hand, and Northern Ireland Ministers and Departments, on the other, so that either can discharge the functions of the other."

Such provision is precisely what we debated in our proceedings on the Scotland Bill—which the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) participated in and attended assiduously.

There will have to be agency arrangements between Departments in Belfast and those in London. However, the matter is more complicated than that, as some arrangements will include also the Cardiff Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. That is why I gave the example of fisheries. As we live in island communities, various arrangements may be required, and I should have thought that no self-respecting Member of this Parliament, the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament would allow arrangements to go unchecked.

Clearly, democratic checks and balances of the arrangements will be developed over the years, in Belfast, Cardiff and Scotland, and in this place. There is therefore no need for amendment No. 13. Fortunately, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield described it as a probing amendment.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Is it not true that, even in this place, we are concerned occasionally when Ministers inform us of an action after it is has been taken? Would it not be better if Ministers had the approval of the Assembly or of this place before taking some actions? We can do very little about something once it is done.

Dr. Godman: For many years, the hon. Gentleman and I sat almost side by side on the Opposition Benches, and suffered from the previous Government the type of conduct that he describes. I should hope that matters will be done much differently by the new Administration, although he may be a little more cynical about that than I am.

Clause 21 allows four types of arrangements, and the Assembly partner may be dominant in some of them. I should think that Scotland would have a bigger role to play than Northern Ireland, or—dare I say it—London, in arrangements on fisheries, for example.

As amendment No. 13 is a probing amendment, and as the concordat—as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield said in his graceful way—is a nebulous concept, we should stick with clause 21 as it is.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): It seems that clause 21 is really just repeating arrangements that existed between the old Stormont Parliament and United Kingdom Parliament on matters such as various national standards, social security, health and agriculture. The question is, how will the chain of command operate? Given that Parliament is supreme and retains its right to make laws, I begin to wonder what need there is for agency status.

Surely the United Kingdom civil service will still operate, at least to some extent, in Northern Ireland, and therefore will fall directly under the control of the responsible Minister in the national Parliament. Therefore, what will the relationship be between those civil servants and the Minister with responsibility for that particular element of Government service in Northern Ireland—or in Scotland or in Wales? To whom will those civil servants be responsible—to the immediately responsible Minister or to the United Kingdom Minister? If it is to the responsible Minister, will he be responsible to the United Kingdom Minister?

The arrangements will operate not only in one or two little corners but, presumably, in all social security matters and in many health matters, in health standards and in the training of medical staff. They will operate also in agriculture—at which point we run into the problem of United Kingdom agricultural policies that are, under the common agricultural policy, run in conjunction with European Community agricultural policies. If we are not clear about how the arrangements will operate in the months and years ahead, I think that we will get into an awful lot of very complicated difficulties. We will have to deal also with the whole matter of European money, which goes far beyond the CAP issues that I mentioned.

The Minister owes us a fairly full explanation of how the arrangements will operate. It is not good enough to say, "We're going to sort the matter out over the next few months." They have not only to sort the matter out now, but be able to tell us about it.

I am somewhat puzzled about the provision on the Post Office, which I thought was a national institution. I suppose that we will be able to continue using the Post Office for distribution of pensions and social security benefits. Perhaps that was the intention. However, if so, surely the Post Office in Northern Ireland would be acting as an agency of the United Kingdom Government, rather than as an agent of the Northern Ireland Administration?

Those are a few thoughts on the tip of a very large iceberg. The Committee and the people of Northern Ireland deserve a very full explanation of the matter.

Perhaps we do not really need such an agency system. Perhaps it would be far better if many of those matters were dealt with directly by this place.

Mr. Worthington: I have reached my advanced age without bothering with concordats, and I do not think that, because of this amendment, I should change my life style now. The Opposition are trying to complicate the relatively simple but—I agree with the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross)—important issue of relationships, which will have to be worked out, between this Parliament and the Assembly. In all fairness, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman all the answers now, but hope that I will be able to deal with the points that he raised.

There are relationships between the Northern Ireland Office, the Northern Ireland civil service and bodies in Great Britain. I can give some examples of how relationships will in future have to be worked out. The lottery, for example, will remain a United Kingdom function. However, some aspects of the lottery are currently dealt with by Northern Ireland institutions—so that, in sports and arts matters, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland administer the lottery on behalf of the United Kingdom lottery.

I see no reason to change that relationship. It seems perfectly sensible to maintain it, although there will have to be an agreement on that. Although the Northern Ireland Assembly will have responsibility for administering aspects of the lottery in relation to the Sports Council and the Arts Council in Northern Ireland, the responsibility for the administration of the lottery will remain with the UK Parliament.

Another example of an existing relationship that will have to be worked out involves the Child Support Agency. The CSA is run as part of the structure of the Department of Health and Social Services in Northern Ireland and deals with Northern Ireland cases, but it also administers cases for a large part of eastern England. We shall have to work out how that will be administered in future, but there would seem to be a need for an agency arrangement.

Mr. Grieve: Will the Minister assure the House that a paper similar to that produced for Scotland and Wales will be produced before the conclusion of consideration of the Bill?

9 pm

Mr. Worthington: I cannot give that assurance, because I am sure that dozens of papers have been produced for the Bills dealing with Scotland and Wales. The hon. Gentleman has to be much more specific. If he will write to me with details of his request, I shall deal with it.

Concordats may well be developed in future between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Parliament, but they will not, as has been suggested, be a means of central control. A concordat involves concord or agreement between two equal parties which decide of their own free will to do something that benefits both of them.

There will be no problem about divided loyalties in the civil service. The devolved administration will be served very professionally by the Northern Ireland civil service. There may well be concordats but, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) recognised, clause 21 re-enacts section 11 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, under which a number of agency arrangements have been agreed.

The clause 21 arrangements do not affect the ultimate responsibility of the principal Department or Minister for the discharge of the functions in question, and so do not involve any fundamental transfer of those functions to an alternative responsibility. They work at an operational level, not at a policy level. With a concordat, we would be dealing with policy and the development of different policies. We are simply saying that it makes sense in this context to have an operational agreement between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Parliament. That is the sensible way to carry on.

Mr. William Ross: If a Northern Ireland Department is simply administering a UK function, to whom are the civil servants who are doing the work responsible? Are they responsible to their own Minister and, through the chain of command, to the Minister in this House, or to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? What is the chain of command and responsibility?

Mr. Worthington: I cannot answer hypothetical questions. The agreement would be different in each case. In each case, the chain of command and responsibility would need to be worked out between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Parliament. When we ask a body that is part of the Northern Ireland Assembly to undertake what is essentially a UK responsibility, it seems sensible to promote good relationships between the two bodies. I therefore have to resist the move towards concordats, and I ask the hon. Member for Beaconsfield to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. William Ross *rose—*

The Chairman: Order. The Minister has sat down.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister for his comments, but it does not sound as if the matter has been considered as fully as it might have been. That might be a reflection of the way in which Northern Ireland has been governed over the years. It is a happy development that we are discussing a Bill that will bring about a great change in that respect. Will the Minister examine the issue carefully and, if necessary, discuss it with the Secretary of State for Scotland who has great knowledge of it?

Mr. William Ross: Before the hon. Gentleman sits down, perhaps he will inquire of the Minister whether the arrangements will be informal, or made by order so that the House has a chance to look at them?

Mr. Grieve: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will ask the Minister precisely that question.

Mr. Worthington: I am sorry that I did not spot earlier that the hon. Member for East Londonderry wanted to intervene. Obviously, when one is dealing with millions of pounds, as in each of those cases, formal administrative agreements would be drawn up. Clearly, it would not be on an informal basis.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful for a little more clarity being cast. On the basis that, when I write to the Minister I shall

[Mr. Grieve]

have a more detailed reply, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 21 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 22

STATUTORY COMMITTEES

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I beg to move amendment No. 14, in page 11, line 2, at end insert

', except that the chairman shall not be a member of the same party as the Northern Ireland Minister being advised and assisted by the statutory committee.'.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 152, in clause 22, page 11, leave out lines 17 to 20 and insert—

'(5) Standing Orders shall provide that, where the figures given by the formula for two or more political parties are equal, each of those figures shall be recalculated using the formula:

$$\frac{S}{1+C+M}$$

Where the figures given by this formula for two or more political parties are also equal, each of those figures shall be recalculated with S being the number of first preference votes cast for the party at the last general election of members of the Assembly.'.

Mr. Moss: Clause 22 seeks to establish a number of statutory Committees to advise and assist each Northern Ireland Minister with the formulation of policy and to monitor the work of each Department. It seeks to put into legislation paragraphs 8 and 9 of strand 1 of the Belfast agreement.

Paragraph 8 of the agreement provides a definition of how the "Chairs and Deputy Chairs" of the Committees will be determined. The strange use of language in the agreement has been translated in the Bill to Chairman and Deputy Chairman. The Chairman and Deputy Chairman are to be

"allocated proportionally by the d'Hondt system"

which is outlined in subsection (4).

Paragraph 9 of the Belfast agreement details specific powers to those Committees. It states:

"They will have the power to:

consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of overall budget allocation;

approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee stage of relevant primary legislation;

call for persons and papers;

initiate enquiries and make reports;

consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by its Minister."

However, the Bill does not detail those powers. It states simply in clause 22(2)(a) that Standing Orders shall make provision

"for establishing committees of Members of the Assembly to advise and assist each Northern Ireland Minister in the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his responsibilities as a Minister".

The emphasis is on the formulation of policy and there is no mention of the role in paragraph 9 of the agreement to monitor the work of the Executive and scrutinise primary and secondary legislation. I hope that the Minister will clarify that point, because, on the face of it, those detailed functions of the Committees seem to have been overlooked.

The agreement goes to great lengths to achieve political and community balance in the Assembly. Clause 4 sets out clear rules with regard to weighted majorities under the definition of cross-community support. Why, then, does the Bill not seek to extend such checks and balances to the operation of statutory Committees? As I interpret clause 22(3), it is more than likely that, by operating the same d'Hondt system for choosing the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Committees, the nominated officers of the respective political parties could and may choose to select statutory Committees that parallel the ministerial Departments that they have already chosen. That could lead to exclusive control by one party of one or more of the Northern Ireland Departments.

Ministers and Chairmen of Committees could work hand in hand to dominate the work of that Department and the Committee, to the detriment of the best interests of fairness and balance in the working of the Assembly and of good government in Northern Ireland.

The amendment would prevent such exclusive control by ruling out the possibility of a Chairman of a statutory Committee being of the same party as the Minister heading the relevant Department. However, a Deputy Chairman of the same party as the Minister could still be selected under the d'Hondt system.

We believe that the amendment is compatible with the Belfast agreement and would reinforce the sentiments of fairness, balance and accountability. It would block off an obvious and potentially damaging loophole in the Bill.

Mr. Öpik: When I was just a schoolboy, way back in the 1980s, at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, algebra was one of my favourite subjects. I remember the adage that was occasionally shared in my class that two plus two equals nought—if we rounded it down to the nearest 10. To some extent, that is the basis for my amendment. An injustice is built into what happens if there is a tie break in the nomination for Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of the statutory Committees.

Clause 22 says:

"Standing orders shall provide that, where the figures given by the formula for two or more political parties are equal, each of those figures shall be recalculated with S being equal to the number of first preference votes cast for the party at the last general election of members of the Assembly."

Without going too far into the mathematics, that means that the formula that applies to the allocation of Ministers in the event of a tie break also applies to the allocation of Committee chairmanships.

The problem is that using the same tie break rule could result in an unbalanced outcome. For example, a party with 14 seats could get two Ministries and two chairmanships, while a party with seven seats got none of either. That does not conform to the spirit of the agreement, which is clear about proportionality. Paragraph 5(a) of strand 1 refers to the

"allocation of Committee Chairs, Ministers and Committee membership in proportion to party strengths".

The system will not be completely proportional if the situation that I have described results.

My amendment would modify the formula, to right that wrong and give the small parties a chance of getting a chairmanship in the event of a tie break. The amendment would remove subsection (5) and insert:

"Standing Orders shall provide that, where the figures given by the formula for two or more political parties are equal, each of those figures shall be recalculated using the formula:

S/(1+C+M)

Where the figures given by this formula for two or more political parties are also equal, each of those figures shall be recalculated with S being the number of first preference votes cast for the party at the last general election of members of the Assembly."

In essence, the amendment proposes that, in the event of a tie, the number of Ministries already allocated should be considered in decisions on allocating chairmanships. The proposed formula clearly follows the spirit of the Belfast agreement, which refers to proportionality for Ministries and chairmanships collectively, not just separately. The amendment is important because it creates a collective calculation.

Safeguards must be workable; I am glad to say that there would be nothing complex about applying the proposed formula following an election—even though it might be complex to explain in the Chamber. It ensures that all sections of the community can participate and work together, and that justice is seen to be done even for smaller parties that might otherwise be bereft of any meaningful positions of responsibility in the Assembly. There would be no downside for the larger partie because the proposed formula would kick in only when they already have the lion's share of ministerial positions—possibly all ministerial positions—and chairmanships.

One point that has not been mentioned in the debate is that the smaller parties actually received many votes. The other benefit of the amendment is that it acknowledges that minority parties have a right to play a significant role in the functioning of the Assembly. Once again, that is in the spirit of the agreement. Will the Minister give me an assurance that what I can only assume was an oversight will be seriously reconsidered over the summer recess, and that technical amendments to right a wrong facing smaller parties will be tabled at a later stage?

Finally, I suppose I must thank the mathematics department of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution for making the amendment possible by giving me a reasonable education.

9.15 pm

Mr. McNamara: I am not sure whether hon. Members, particularly those on the Government Front Bench, would congratulate the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, although I am sure that the subject of the amendment will be of great interest to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and will occupy his mind throughout the summer recess. I am sure that, when we return, he will send many pages of squared notepaper covered with work to their Lordships, most of whom had the benefit only of a classical education rather than that of the RBAI.

I should like to take up one point made by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss). On the face of it, his proposition that the Chairman and the Minister being advised by the Committee should be of different parties appears very sensible, sound and secure. Although, normally, I would go along with that, in this case, we would be providing one safeguard too many. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have their parties and colleagues to consult on such matters. Perhaps the allocation of such posts is better left to them and their parties and to the other parties. We should be considering the ability of people in certain relationships.

I accept that there may be a danger of exclusivity and of certain areas being hived off as nationalist or Unionist, as the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire suggested. Although those difficulties might emerge, we should leave matters of chairmanship to the good sense, good will and what we hope will be the spirit of the new Assembly.

Mr. Worthington: Following the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Minister of State that I reply to the debate on this group of amendments, I realised belatedly that it includes the d'Hondt principle. I looked through the amendments and rejoiced that nothing tested my algebra—until I came to the amendment tabled by the honourable anorak on the Liberal Democrat Benches, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). [HON. MEMBERS: "That is unparliamentary language."] I do not think that it is, but that could be tested.

The Chairman: Order. It might be unparliamentary if there is a ruling by tomorrow morning.

Mr. Worthington: I had better withdraw it then, and apologise profusely.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) pointed out, there is a danger here. I understand why the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire has a desire to help small parties—it has been bred into him—but there can come a time when helping small parties overcomes the principle of proportionality. We must ensure that that principle, which is at the centre of the Bill, succeeds in the end.

The d'Hondt principle will certainly work for the Ministers, and perhaps 20 times again, for Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Therefore, many people will have positions of influence within the Assembly. I cannot promise the hon. Gentleman that we will embrace his amendment, but there is a link between it and amendment No. 14, which was moved by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss). We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing the amendment to the Committee.

Mr. Öpik: May I emphasise, for the sake of the record, that our amendment exactly enshrines the principle of proportionality? That is why I tabled it.

Mr. Worthington: We wish to safeguard the principle of proportionality. That was the spirit behind amendment No. 14. It would be unfortunate if the Minister and the Chair of the Committee were from the same party. That situation is not specifically provided for in the agreement, but, in the spirit of the agreement, it would seem desirable that a Committee Chair should come from a different party, if the Committee is to carry out the scrutiny part of its role effectively.

However, there may be circumstances in which an overlap is unavoidable. We cannot accept the amendment as it stands, but we intend to introduce a similar

[Mr. Worthington]

amendment at a later stage, while repeating that, no matter what the system may be, we cannot guarantee that there will always be perfect balance across, say, 10 Committees with Ministers, Chairs and Vice-Chairs. We recognise the idea behind the amendment, and we will consider it over the summer. I can give the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire that promise, and, in considering that principle, we will also take into account the principle raised by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Coming from the Methodist college, I shall support the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), who comes from the rival institute, in suggesting that the Minister's latter comments are most welcome. I refer to the 1975 constitutional convention, when we went further and the Committees had to be divided 50:50 between those who were on the executive and those who were not. The chairmanships, too, had to be 50:50. That contrasts with the lack of generosity in this place, where the Government must always have a majority on Standing or Select Committees. As the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) pointed out, the smallest two parties returned to the Assembly have very able Members who could perform a useful role in the Committees.

Mr. Worthington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I hope that, in the light of my assurances, the amendment will be withdrawn.

Mr. Moss: We are grateful for the Minister's comments, and, on the basis of what he has said, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Committee report progress; to sit again tomorrow.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Road Traffic

That the draft Community Drivers' Hours and Recording Equipment (Amendment) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 22nd June, be approved.

Animals

That the draft Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (Amendment) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 25th June, be approved.

Roads and Bridges (Scotland)

That the draft Security for Private Road Works (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 30th June, be approved.

Social Security

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Worker's Compensation) (Payment of Claims) Amendment Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 2nd July, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

M62 (Junction 8)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

9.24 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise two matters that are of great concern to my constituents: traffic congestion and the need to create more jobs. Those matters crop up week after week in my surgeries and in letters and telephone calls from the people whom I represent. The missing junction 8 on the M62 could be part of the solution to both problems.

Warrington's traffic is a nightmare because the town grew very rapidly without the necessary roads infrastructure. Problems are particularly acute, first, for those who live in the Westbrook and Callands areas of my constituency, where residents often cannot even get out of or into their homes because of congestion along Cromwell avenue and around the Gemini area, where Warrington's big retail developments are. Secondly, those who live at Winwick and along the A49 in Warrington also suffer congestion because of the knock-on effect on junction 9 of the M62.

The new junction 8 is intended to relieve both problems, but it should also open access to the Omega site, which is one of the most important sites for economic development in the north-west. Not only is that vital for my constituents; it has strategic importance for the entire region.

My constituents have been very badly served by the way in which the project has been handled. When the M62 was built in 1972, it had two junctions: junction 7 at Rainhill near St. Helens and junction 9 at Winwick near Warrington. Provision was made for a junction 8 to be added later as the Warrington new town expanded.

We are still waiting 26 years later. The project entered the Government's trunk roads programme in 1994, and my constituents are becoming very impatient waiting for progress. I should make it clear that the reason for the delay has nothing to do with money, as the project is a section 278 scheme, which will be funded by the Commission for the New Towns—no Government money is involved.

We might reasonably have expected that the project's path would be fairly smooth, subject to the usual statutory inquiry procedures. However, that has not been the case. Over the past year in particular, some of us have felt that we were living in a "Through the Looking-Glass" world—the twists and turns of the plot were becoming very complicated.

I must give some of the details of that plot to explain why my constituents feel angry and frustrated waiting for the new junction. When the Government announced their roads review on 19 June last year, the sponsors of the scheme were told that it would be put on hold pending the outcome of that review. That caused consternation in Warrington—we could not understand why a section 278 scheme would be affected by the review. Telephone calls went back and forth between my office and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and I must tell my hon. Friend the Minister that it was very difficult to get an answer from the Department about whether the scheme was included in the review.

Eventually, the Department confirmed that the scheme was not included. On 7 July last year, I received a letter from my noble Friend Baroness Hayman, in which, she said:

"I have decided that, in line with other section 278 funded schemes, it should be allowed to proceed through the approval process in the normal way."

At last we thought we were getting somewhere, and matters proceeded. There were discussions between the various interested parties, and the Highways Agency told my local authority that it expected the scheme to proceed to public inquiry in June or July this year. However, there were yet more delays.

In January this year, I wrote to the Highways Agency and to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, only to be told that the timetable had slipped again. In a letter to me on 6 February, Baroness Hayman said clearly and unequivocally that

"the scheme will go to Public Inquiry this autumn".

Sighs of relief all round. We were disappointed that the timetable had slipped, but at least we thought that we had a firm date.

Perhaps we should have known better. When we did not get a date for public inquiry, I put down a further question. On 12 May, I was told:

"The scheme is being considered as part of the . . . Roads Review."—[*Official Report*, 12 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 62.]

Letters went back and forth, and the Department corrected the answer on 14 July. The letter I received at that point, while confirming that the scheme was not in the roads review, did tell me that the public inquiry could not start now until early next year.

The reasons given for that were that the Government's new transport policy would include a new approach to the appraisal of such projects, and that the Highways Agency would need to show that the appraisal of the scheme had taken account of the new policy. I accept that that is the case—this scheme must be decided according to the new policy.

I do not accept that that is an argument for delay, because much of the work on the scheme has been done by the Highways Agency, and much of the information is there. In any case, if the scheme had proceeded according to plan, that inquiry would be up and running and would not have been affected at all. Instead, my constituents have been subjected to further delays, yet more traffic congestion and—most importantly—a denial of job opportunities.

As far as we in Warrington are concerned, this is an economic development issue and not just a roads issue. The Omega site, which the junction would open up, is a key strategic employment site for the whole region. It has 500 acres which, it is estimated, could supply 10,000 jobs—jobs which are badly needed, not simply in my constituency but in the area round about. Moreover, the aim of the site is to supply manufacturing jobs, which are needed badly in Warrington. The manufacturing sector has lost more than 8,000 jobs since 1981—that is 18 per cent. of the total. That is higher than the figure for Cheshire as a whole, and more than the figure for the north-west. It is more than the average for the whole country.

Without junction 8, Omega cannot be developed. The consequences of a failure to secure that development cannot be underestimated. Not only is the site one of the

[Helen Jones]

nine identified as major inward investment sites for the north-west, it is generally considered by the market to be the best opportunity in the north-west of England for major economic development.

To understand why, it is necessary to know about the location of the site. It lies at the axis of the north-south and east-west transport spines, and has been identified in regional planning guidance as the primary development corridor for the region. It is also halfway between Manchester and Merseyside, and is well placed to take advantage of international transport links, whether by sea or by air. It is only two miles from the west coast main line, so it can be served by rail freight traffic as well. In fact, if one had to design a development site from scratch, it would be difficult to come up with a better one, or one that would fit more neatly with the Government's integrated transport strategy. Also, it is close to areas with objective 1 and 2 status, so the development of Omega would help to provide jobs and spin-off benefits for some of the most depressed parts of the region.

If my hon. Friend the Minister looks at the early-day motion, she will see that it is signed, not only by hon. Members representing the immediate vicinity, but by those representing Liverpool and Manchester as well because they recognise the benefits of the development. That is why about £9 million has already been invested in the site, in acquisition, site clearance, services and marketing. I cannot see the logic of promoting the development of the region and trying to reverse the decline in manufacturing industry, while at the same time delaying the development of a road that is vital to both.

I represent a constituency that, despite many of its economic successes, still contains some of the most deprived areas in north Cheshire—areas that have suffered second, and even third, generation unemployment. My constituents look to the Government to develop the employment opportunities that they so desperately need in such sites. We are still waiting, and while we wait the traffic chaos increases.

I mentioned the problems of people living in the Callands and Westbrook areas of my constituency. I can testify to those at first hand. I have turned back in that area at peak periods because the traffic simply does not move along Cromwell avenue. That situation has arisen because the Commission for the New Towns and the previous Secretary of State granted planning permission for major retail development without the necessary road infrastructure and without building that road junction. For instance, a huge Marks and Spencer store is in the area, and an Ikea store that attracts 2.2 million visitors a year.

Regional car traffic comes on to the roads in Warrington, which are simply not equipped to deal with it. Often, the result is almost gridlock-level traffic around Cromwell avenue, up the A49 and back to junction 9 on the M62. Indeed, at peak times one sees traffic queuing to get off at junction 9 to go into Warrington—stationary traffic on the motorway. That situation is beginning to concern the Cheshire police because of the potential for accidents. Furthermore, traffic in Winwick and down the A49 to Warrington is a constant problem, because all the traffic has to come off at one junction.

The Highways Agency has confirmed that pollution is increasing because of that traffic. On the A49 south of the motorway, standards for carbon monoxide, benzene and oxides of nitrogen are already exceeded, and there is no chance of that improving while the current situation continues because traffic levels north and south of the motorway are expected to increase significantly if the new junction is not built. This is not a case of the often-quoted equation, "More roads equals more cars." In fact, the opposite is true. The lack of a planned highway infrastructure is a major contributor to the congestion that is plaguing local residents, hampering the development of local businesses and damaging the environment in the area.

It is also true to say that there have been objections to the proposed junction and the scheme around it, although they are few in number compared with the massive support that those have received in the constituency. I believe that most of the objections can be met. Indeed, a number of discussions have taken place among the various parties involved.

Noise fencing, mounding, tree and shrub planting and full cut-off flat glass lanterns can minimise the impact on the surrounding area. Detailed traffic calming measures are to be put in place in Burtonwood, to discourage traffic from going through residential areas. For both those who support the scheme and those who do not, there has to be an end to the uncertainty, and a decision has to be made.

I believe that the scheme is important and right for my constituency. It also fits the objectives of an integrated transport policy. It would allow us to create dedicated bus lanes, ease congestion and improve safety for people in residential areas, encouraging them to make more journeys on foot. I certainly would not walk in Callands and Westbrook with the current amount of traffic.

The scheme will be better for the environment, allowing us to improve air quality and reduce pollution along the A49. It would also allow priority improvements to be introduced for cyclists around junction 9, so we could perhaps encourage more people to cycle from Winwick, on one side of the junction, into the centre of Warrington. Those are the Government's objectives; they are right, and the scheme would help to meet them.

The scheme is one of those rare creatures, a green road, and people want it. It should be a flagship development, because it is a way of showing how the integrated transport policy can work. Instead, while we wait, the costs are escalating by possibly £1.5 million a year and my constituents are living with chaos.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will accept that the difficulties that we have experienced over the past year cannot go on. For the sake of the environment, of my constituents who need jobs and of a proper integrated transport policy, which we do not have in Warrington at the moment, the junction needs to go ahead. I hope that she will be able to tell me when the public inquiry will be. We need a firm date for it at last. I hope that, after 26 years, we will finally get some progress and the scheme will become a reality.

9.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) not only on securing this debate, but on her wealth of detail and the no small passion with which she has raised a matter that is obviously of very real concern to her and her constituents.

That concern is shared and, indeed, expressed with a similar passion to Ministers, by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth). The issues are not only transport and traffic congestion, but job creation and regeneration in one of the areas of our country that so desperately need it.

The House will know that the Government are committed to developing a sustainable and integrated transport policy to tackle the serious problems of congestion and pollution that we face, and the publication on Monday of our White Paper "New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" has significantly advanced that process.

We changed policy and direction away from the previous Administration's fragmented provision of infrastructure and services towards an integrated approach that will serve the country's needs for a strong economy, a sustainable environment and an inclusive society. Good communications are essential to delivering those aims, so we must reduce our excessive dependency on the car and lorry if we are not to be choked by increasing pollution and gridlocked by increasing congestion. Those problems plague my hon. Friend's constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South even now.

The scheme formally entered the roads programme in November 1995, although preliminary work had started earlier. It is being undertaken by the Highways Agency on behalf and at the expense, of the Commission for the New Towns, via an agreement under section 278 of the Highways Act 1980 between the agency and the commission, signed in March 1997.

The scheme provides for a new grade-separated junction on the M62 north of Warrington, between junction 7, which serves the A568 to Widnes, and junction 9, which serves A49 access into Warrington. The M62 would also be widened between the proposed junction 8 and existing junction 9, and there would be new access arrangements for the Burtonwood motorway service area. The scheme is designed to serve major retail and business sites, and to open up new areas for development in Warrington. It will relieve local roads, and junction 9, of traffic congestion related to existing major retail sites.

In February 1997, draft orders were published as required by the Highways Act 1980, and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport announced to the House on 19 June 1997 that work on such developer-funded schemes would continue because the schemes either had been or would be scrutinised through the appropriate planning processes. The inquiry did not take place immediately, however, because the Commission for the New Towns asked the Highways Agency to consider reducing the scope, and hence the cost, of the works by deleting or deferring some or all of the motorway-widening element of the proposals.

Following detailed investigations, the Highways Agency concluded that, for safety reasons, widening should remain an essential component of the scheme from the outset, a conclusion that the commission accepted. A public inquiry was programmed to convene in the autumn, but we had developed our approach to road schemes within the context both of our roads review and of our work on an integrated transport policy. Ministers agreed that the scheme lies outside the scope of the roads review because it is 100 per cent. developer-funded, but it is not exempt from our new appraisal approach. It remains a major road scheme, and we must be able to show that we have taken into account all aspects of its impact.

That impact will be assessed in line with the new approach to appraisal announced in the White Paper on integrated transport. The new approach operates within the framework of our five objectives for road schemes. My hon. Friend has referred to our objectives of integration, safety, accessibility, economy and environment because of their importance to the development and regeneration of her constituency and to the easing of the traffic situation. Although much of the approach uses established techniques and will build on work already done, a considerable amount of data gathered—for example, data on air quality, noise and landscape impacts—needs to be analysed again and re-presented.

The prospect of further delay to the programme has disappointed the Commission for the New Towns, as well as my hon. Friend's constituents and others in Warrington. The Omega site, situated in the south-west quadrant of the new junction on land that formerly housed the RAF Burtonwood airfield, represents one of the major regeneration opportunities in the north of England. Planning authorisation for employment use having already been secured, it has the potential to generate thousands of new jobs. The commission sees provision of ready access to the M62 as fundamental to its success, and the opening up of the Omega site remains the commission's primary objective in funding the works. A secondary objective is the release of remaining development land on the adjoining Gemini site, with improved motorway access via the proposed Gemini link.

The scheme will be the first large road scheme to go to public inquiry following publication of the integrated transport White Paper and the roads review report. We have taken the view that the Highways Agency should explain the scheme in terms of our new approach to appraisal, and that will require extra work. If the agency arrived at the public inquiry without applying the new approach, people would rightly criticise it for failing to do so, and that could lead to the inquiry being adjourned. We believe that the extra costs and delays involved in an adjournment would far outweigh those that will stem from the further preparation work that we are undertaking. We have concluded that the earliest possible start date for the public inquiry would be February next year.

Our new approach is designed to draw together the large amount of information collected as part of the appraisal of a transport problem and alternative solutions. It looks at the contribution of different forms of transport in developing alternative solutions and the potential effect of the new integrated transport approach, including the scope for and the effect of demand-management measures. It is our intention that that new approach, once finalised, will be applied to the appraisal of all transport projects, not only all road schemes.

As part of the appraisal, the economic impact of road investment is taken into account, largely through the estimated benefits of reduced journey times for commercial, business and other traffic. Techniques are being developed to assess the economic value of journey-time reliability and to identify those improvements which contribute most to reliability. In the interim, the current review has sought to identify such benefits in qualitative terms.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

Each case must be assessed on its merits. In some cases, road access is essential to provide access to sites that could not otherwise be developed, and the contribution to regeneration is a complex issue. We agree with the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment that improvements are needed to the methods used in local and regional economic impact studies, so that the contribution of transport investment to regeneration can be better assessed.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing these important issues to the attention of the House. She has been consistent in advocating, as has our hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South, that the proposed scheme should proceed as quickly as possible. However, given the reasons I have already outlined, I ask my hon. Friend to remain patient over the coming—and, given the time that it has taken for the scheme to begin, comparatively few—remaining months.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 24 July 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Department of Culture, Media and Sport

9.34 am

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will no doubt be aware that, in recent days, we have had a succession of Ministers coming to the House to outline the spending plans for their Departments. Is it not a disgrace that, when it comes to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, what we get is an interview on the "Today" programme and a press conference in the National Gallery?

Given the wide-ranging structural changes that are proposed, including the dismantling of the Arts Council and the abolition of the English tourist board, and the fact that the statement has been awaited with great interest by many people across the country whose livelihoods will be affected by the changes, will you use your influence to recommend to the Secretary of State that he comes here forthwith to make an oral statement to the House and to answer some difficult questions on a contentious document?

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As vice-chairman of the all-party tourism group, I know that tourism and hospitality are responsible for creating more new jobs than any other industry. To sound the possible death knell of a strong, independent English tourist board to journalists rather than to the House leaves us in great difficulty when we want to represent the interests of our constituents.

Madam Speaker: As the House knows, Secretaries of State determine for themselves whether statements are made at the Dispatch Box or by means of a written question. If there is not to be a statement at the Dispatch Box, I should expect the Secretary of State to make a statement in the usual way, by means of a written answer, and to see that the supporting documentation is available to Members in the Vote Office. I know that those on the Treasury Bench this morning will have noted my remarks, and I am sure that they will ensure that the proper procedures are now carried out.

PETITION

Acid Gas Escape (Killamarsh)

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Barnes: I wish to present a petition, which arises from two incidents in which highly dangerous clouds of acid gas escaped in Killamarsh in my constituency. Following the first incident, I made a speech in the House on the matter on 20 May, but I was prevented from seeking a speech on the second incident, as I was rushed into hospital with a stroke on 4 June. I am pleased to be able now to press my constituents' justified concerns with this petition. It reads:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of the residents of Killamarsh, N. E. Derbyshire

Declares that the siting of the Sarp UK plant (formerly Leigh Environmental) extremely close to centres of population—particularly two schools and a popular country park—is inherently dangerous. We call for its closure.

Until this can be achieved, the Petitioners therefore request that the House of Common

1. Introduce legislation requiring provision of an off-site safety plan to warn the community of dangerous incidents; an

2. urge the Minister for the Environment to:

a) refuse permission for any further developments or extensions of existing licences to Sarp UK or any other company operating on this site which may be requested of his Department;

b) instruct the Health and Safety Executive to conduct a complete safety review of the plant; and

c) instruct the Environment Agency to undertake constant monitoring of the operation of the plant, taking particular account of the gases and foul smells in the atmosphere regularly reported by residents, with a view to providing a complete cessation of these and the foul smells coming from the drains in the village

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

It is signed by Jane Holden of Nethermoor Lane, Killamarsh and 7,191 residents of the area. There are fewer people than that on the electoral register in Killamarsh, but we need to take into account the additional people living in the surrounding area.

To lie upon the Table.

Madam Speaker: It is good to see the hon. Member back.

Orders of the Day

Northern Ireland Bill

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Considered in Committee, pursuant to Order [17 July] [Progress, 23 July].

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Clause 24

DATES OF ELECTIONS AND DISSOLUTIONS

9.39 am

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I beg to move amendment No. 150, in, page 13, line 4, leave out from 'If' to 'by' in line 12 and insert

'three months after either the First Minister or Deputy First Minister ceases to hold office the Assembly has not elected a First Minister or Deputy First Minister Her Majesty shall'.

The amendment is to some extent consequential to an amendment that we discussed yesterday. It concerns an issue that goes to the very heart of the concept of an Assembly that will sit for a fixed four-year term, unlike this House, which sits not for a fixed term but for a maximum period during which the Prime Minister may, at any time, seek a dissolution. The objection to clause 24(4) is that it undermines the basic concept of the fixed term that is proposed for the Assembly.

Subsection (4) says that the Assembly may be dissolved on three conditions. The third, which is particularly sweeping, is that

"it is in the public interest that the Assembly should be dissolved".

Who is to consider that? The clause states that it will be Her Majesty, but, in practice, it will be the Secretary of State. A simple provision states that a body that is supposedly elected for a fixed four-year term may be dissolved if the Secretary of State believes that it is in the public interest.

That is contrary to the concept of the Assembly's existence and undermines the democratic process. It says to the electorate of Northern Ireland that although they may elect a body, the Secretary of State, who represents and is accountable to no one in Northern Ireland, may, if she considers it appropriate, turn out all its Members. That treats the electorate with contempt and disdain. I trust that it would never happen because no one would be foolish enough to do it. There is therefore no reason why the provision should be in the Bill.

Objection can also be made to the other grounds for dissolution set out in paragraphs (a) and (b). The first is that

"the persons who are the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Ministers are not able to carry out their functions".

That does not refer to issues of individual incapacity such as the First Minister being ill or unable to discharge his functions, in which case action could be taken. There is no such provision in the clause. We need only read the history books to see that there have been times when persons have occupied positions on the Treasury Benches and been incapable of discharging their functions for various reasons, but we need not go into the details of that. One wonders what circumstances the draftsmen envisaged in which all Ministers, not only the First Minister, would be unable to carry out their functions and, as paragraph (b) states,

"if they were to resign, the persons who would be likely to succeed them would not be able to carry out their functions".

Although the provisions in paragraphs (a) and (b) are somewhat absurd, it is the provision in paragraph (c) which is fundamentally objectionable. It runs counter to the spirit of the Bill by demonstrating a degree of contempt for the electorate in Northern Ireland, and it undermines the concept of the Assembly as a body that operates for a fixed four-year term.

Hon. Members will remember that yesterday, when we were considering the provisions for the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the consequences of one or other resigning, I proposed an amendment providing for a three-month period subsequent to that resignation in which there would be an opportunity for re-election. We may argue about whether the period should be three months or less—the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) suggested a seven-day period, which I thought too short—but we need to provide a period of between one week and three months in which the Assembly should try to re-elect First and Deputy First Ministers. If it were unable to do so during that period, that is the only case in which the Assembly should be dissolved before it had completed its four-year term.

9.45 am

The amendments that I have tabled would mean that either of the two largest parties would be able to bring about a dissolution of the Assembly if it were determined to do so, simply by arranging for its leader—the First or Deputy First Minister—to resign, not offering any candidate to be re-elected and using its votes to block the re-election of other persons. However, the procedure would be rather cumbersome and would take time, during which the party would have to justify its action, not only to the Assembly, but to the electorate. That is appropriate. It should not be easy for people to bring about the dissolution of a body that is elected for a fixed four-year term. Dissolution should certainly not be caused by the wave of a hand of someone who is not a Member of the Assembly, who is not elected in Northern Ireland and who is not answerable to its people. That is objectionable in principle.

I ask the Government to reconsider clause 24(4) and to consider the amendment, which would provide a procedure to bring about a dissolution while maintaining the integrity of the fixed-term concept by making it difficult to dissolve the Assembly. I point out that, in drafting the amendment, I omitted to provide for the deletion of subsection (5), which would not be appropriate if the amendment were made. We can consider that at a later stage.

My crucial point is that these provisions should be deleted because they are objectionable on democratic grounds and contrary to the concept of the scheme, but there may be circumstances in which a dissolution before the end of a four-year term would be appropriate. The amendment provides for that, but the procedure would not be easy to use because it should be biased in favour of

the Assembly serving its full fixed four-year term and dissolving before that only when it would be difficult, or almost impossible, for it to continue. It should not be easy to seek an early dissolution and it should certainly not be done on the ridiculous grounds set out in clause 24(4).

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): I welcome the amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) because it is interesting to debate the subject. I will not be supporting it, however, because—this is my central point—the clause provides a necessary reserved power. I follow the logic of the right hon. Gentleman's argument that using the provision would bring about a dissolution by the back door, but the sad fact is that if one wanted to dissolve the Assembly, there would be several ways of making it unworkable, as there are in any assembly. The history of Northern Ireland contains examples of assemblies which, through no one's fault, have proved difficult to work for various reasons. That is why the Bill contains the reserved power in clause 24(4).

The clause is not an attempt to undermine the democratic process. Everyone is trying to give Northern Ireland the maximum amount of representative democracy. This is a reserved power, exercisable through Her Majesty by the Secretary of State. As I have said in other discussions on the Bill, we must realise that we are dealing with the democratic process in Northern Ireland and at Westminster. In making the decision to dissolve, the Secretary of State would be answerable to this House.

Mr. Trimble: If it is necessary to have a reserved power in this matter, will the hon. Gentleman compare and contrast it with whatever reserved powers there might be in the Government of Wales Bill and the Scotland Bill? I do not believe that there is equivalent provision in either.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I think the right hon. Gentleman is right. However, I believe that he has more cause than almost anyone in the Committee at the moment to appreciate and acknowledge the fact that the situation in Northern Ireland is different. The history is different. The effort at devolution to Scotland and Wales is the first in modern times; the circumstances are totally different here, because this is not, by a long chalk, the first effort at devolution toward Northern Ireland. In view of the history and the circumstances, I have no hesitation in saying that the reserved power is necessary.

The reserved power deals with the plural—the whole cross-community concept. The power would be exercised if

"the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Ministers are not able to carry out their functions"—

plural—and the same for those who might succeed them. Part of the concept is the idea that, if one Minister cannot carry out his functions, it is likely that the other cannot carry out his either. That is how such a situation might come about.

In clause 24(4)(c) we have the saving grace—quite apart from the overall accountability to the House—that it is for the Secretary of State to gauge whether it is in the public interest for the Assembly to be dissolved. Then, far from doing a dreadful act to democracy, one goes to the people in order to elect a new Assembly; the democratic process takes over.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for drawing attention to the matter, but I do not believe that amendment No. 150 helps the Bill. It would merely prolong a situation which the Secretary of State must have the power to deem a crisis, in which she would accordingly dissolve the Assembly. If the amendment were passed, we would have three months' agony in such a situation: we would lose a very valuable part of the Bill.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the points that the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) made. I do not have clear in my mind the force of the distinction between subsections (3) and (4) of the clause. Amendment No. 150 deals specifically with subsection (4). We have been repeatedly told that the Bill must be in keeping with the spirit of the agreement, so it is interesting that a four-year term is not mentioned in the agreement. We have already stipulated a specific passage of time during which the Assembly should be operative.

I am puzzled; I do not see why subsection (4) is necessary. We are considering the concept of Her Majesty acting on the advice of the Secretary of State—but the Secretary of State already has the power to act by virtue of subsection (3).

Some people may think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) was in dreamland when he tabled amendment No. 150. Some years ago, I visited Holland shortly before a general election. For six months, the two parties that had formed the coalition Government had been unable to come to terms to form a new Government. As I understand it, in such circumstances we would not be in a similar position to Holland, where the existing Government continued to exercise their power until the new Government were in place. We are contemplating a situation where, for whatever reason, the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and other Northern Ireland Ministers were not prepared to work together. If that happened, Her Majesty should have a power by Order in Council to dissolve the Assembly to hold a fresh election after a specified period. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility—humans being what we are—that such a situation might arise. In fact, the Government were considering it. We are suggesting that their proposals are too cumbersome. Our amendment could help by making things easier and more straightforward.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I understand and sympathise with some of the concerns voiced by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) too quickly dismissed those concerns.

I also say to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann that, where possible, and always acknowledging the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, we should attempt to establish similarities in the legislation governing the new assemblies and parliaments that we are creating. He was right to question the difference between clause 24(4) and the provisions relating to a dissolution of the Scottish Parliament. In Scotland, extraordinary general elections are to be held where the Parliament so resolves and, on a Division, a majority of not less than two thirds of its Members votes that it should be dissolved. They are also to be held if the Parliament does not nominate a First Minister during the period specified. The right hon. Gentleman's anxieties are therefore entirely legitimate.

[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

I should like to know the definition of "public interest" in clause 24(4)(c). Clause 24(4)(a) speaks of circumstances where

"the persons who are the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Ministers are not able to carry out their functions".

Could such a situation be brought about by a vote of no confidence by two thirds of the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly?

I hope that the Minister will treat amendment No. 150 sympathetically. I did not hear the right hon. Member for Upper Bann say that it was a probing amendment, but I believe that it is the type of amendment that should be treated with sympathy, especially when considered in relation to the Scottish legislation.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): What pressures would be placed on the Secretary of State to decide that it was in the public interest to dissolve the Assembly? We well know that, since the process that brought in the Irish Republic, the latter has had, and continues to have, a strong influence on what happens in Northern Ireland. If the Irish Republic said that it was not in the public interest for the Assembly to continue, I am sure that—judging by the past record—that view would be immediately accepted and the Assembly would be axed, because the pressures that have been exerted on Northern Ireland have been largely directed from the south of Ireland.

The same thing happened when the Stormont Parliament was first prorogued and then disbanded. We had the same agitation when other assemblies were put in its place, especially the most recent. It is a very serious thing, given that the Anglo-Irish Conference—which continues under the agreement, under another name—would continue to have a very big say in pressurising the Secretary of State to say that it was not in the public interest for the Assembly to continue. The public interest, to the Irish Republic, is its own parochial interest.

The Secretary of State is being given a very wide power indeed. The result of all that we have done in the House, and all the talks, can be taken away by a stroke of a pen, without any Member of the Assembly or Minister of the Assembly—even the First Minister or Deputy First Minister—having any say in the matter.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The Question is—

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford) *rose—*

The Chairman: It would be helpful if Members seeking to participate in the debate in the Committee could give a clear indication to the Chair. Otherwise, the Chair may assume that the debate has been completed.

Mr. Taylor: I would definitely have done so, Sir Alan, had it not occurred to me only two seconds ago that I wanted to speak.

I shall make two brief points. First, it seems amazing that, although the Government are not prepared to remove people from the Assembly Executive even though they belong to a political party that is inextricably linked to a paramilitary organisation that is killing people on the ground, they are prepared to take upon themselves the power to remove all Members of the Assembly. I do not follow that inconsistency.

Secondly, I share the fears expressed by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) that the Government will be influenced by the Dublin Government in deciding whether the Assembly should proceed. As a result of that influence, the Assembly could be closed—and there are precedents for that in the history of Northern Ireland. On numerous occasions in Committee, the Government have rejected amendments from the Ulster Unionist party or from Her Majesty's Opposition on the basis that they are inconsistent with the Stormont agreement. I hope that the Secretary of State is listening to this point. I hope that the Minister will tell us how the amendment is inconsistent with the Belfast agreement—because I believe that he certainly cannot do so in this case.

10 am

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Paul Murphy): This has been an interesting short debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) referred to the histories of past assemblies and similar bodies, and reflected on how it was important for Parliament to have the power to dissolve those bodies in the event of various crises. However, I believe that times have changed and that this agreement and this Northern Ireland Assembly will be more permanent.

We have consulted widely on this clause in recent days, and we have sympathy with the points raised by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and other hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) referred to the Scottish comparison, which is a valid point. It is worth examining it so that we may determine whether there is a read-across from the Scottish to the Northern Ireland situation.

I think that we should re-examine the clause and the consequential amendments that would have to be made to other parts of the Bill.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): Does the Minister agree that proponents of the amendment claim that the clause gives total, absolute and almost dictatorial powers to the Secretary of State? However, clause 24(5) states:

"No recommendation shall be made to Her Majesty to make an Order under subsection (4) unless a draft of it has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament."

That is surely a very strong and adequate democratic safeguard relating to the cause, reason and execution of such a proposal.

Mr. Murphy: In no sense is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State a dictator and she, and anyone who succeeds her, will have to be accountable to the House of Commons and the other place.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The issue is surely the balance between the autonomy of the Northern Ireland Assembly versus the insurance policy of referring the decision to this Chamber and the other place. The real

concern is that the clause goes some way towards undermining the responsibility and trust invested in the Assembly to be able to manage its own affairs.

Mr. Murphy: This is the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and, as such, authority ultimately rests here.

In terms of the Assembly's workability, we believe that we should plan not for failure but for success. We propose to re-examine the clause, consult in detail with the parties during August and September and refer the matter to the other place.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Parliament is sovereign anyway, and thus would be able to do what the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) suggests. However, Northern Ireland representation in this place is very small, and Northern Ireland parties are not represented in the upper House. According to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), the leader of the SDLP, it would not have any representatives in the other place. My party has never been represented there. Therefore, the House of Lords would not have a full complement of spokesmen to represent the people and put the views. The Assembly should at least—

Dr. Godman: Lord Paisley.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I do not think that that will ever happen—and I would not want it to. I would rather be in a place that has real power. Apparently the other place will be dehorned anyway—and does the hon. Gentleman think that I would offer my head for the chop? I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman would make such a suggestion. I will allow him to take my seat.

It is important that the Assembly be allowed at least to express its feelings about the matter.

Mr. Murphy: That is why it is important to talk to the parties in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) referred to the four-year term. He is correct in saying that that is not in the agreement, although it was discussed during the negotiations and all parties agreed that a four-year term should be the norm. The poll may be shifted up to two months before or after it would otherwise be held in order to ensure that it could be held on the same day as other elections, where appropriate. For example, the Assembly election would coincide with local elections in Northern Ireland, which makes sense financially and would increase the voter turnout. Subsection (4)(c) enables a dissolution of the Assembly at any time during the four-year term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde raised several issues. There is no specific provision for votes of no confidence in the Administration rather than in Ministers or parties. We could consider a dissolution on a two-thirds majority—which would be comparable with the Scottish model, as my hon. Friend is aware. As elsewhere, the definition of public interest is in statute and it is not easy to define in abstract. They are just a few reasons why it is important to re-examine the issue, and I ask the right hon. Member for Upper Bann to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Trimble: I thank the Minister for his response and for his willingness to re-examine the matter. I am glad that the Government have had second thoughts, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) for his comments about the desirability of having a read-across into the Northern Ireland institutions from the newly devolved institutions. I thank the Minister for taking that point on board.

It was also pleasant to hear the Minister make the simple but fundamental point—which has been sometimes lost sight of in the past few months through misinterpretation of the position—that Parliament remains sovereign and that, at the end of the day, power over all parts of the United Kingdom returns to the House. That point is made clear in clause 5(6). Therefore, those who are concerned about the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 can be reassured about the absolute sovereignty of the House.

That is also the answer for the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris). If there is a need for a reserved power in order to act in an emergency, the Parliament has the capacity to do so and has no need of such a clause in this Bill. The one time that it was felt necessary to intervene in the terms that the hon. Gentleman described—I did not agree, but it was done—when the House decided in 1972 to prorogue and abolish the Northern Ireland Parliament, legislation was passed in the course of one day to give effect to that action. The point about the undiminished sovereignty of Parliament remains.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Under the terms of the agreement, Parliament and the British Government have agreed that, in the event of a simple majority of people wishing to leave the United Kingdom, there will be no claim of sovereignty—which is exactly what section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 declared.

Mr. Trimble: The hon. and learned Gentleman is entirely wrong. While the United Kingdom continues, the sovereignty of this House is undiminished. If part of the United Kingdom seceded, the situation would be different. The possibility of secession has been explicit in British constitutional legislation since 1921, so the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) does himself no credit by advancing arguments that are simply wrong in law. I shall not pursue the issue further at this stage.

I thank the Minister for his willingness to look again at the matter. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 24 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 25 and 26 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 27

VACANCIES

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I beg to move amendment No. 100, in page 14, leave out lines 9 to 11 and insert—

'(2) Subject to subsection (2A) below an order under subsection (1) shall provide that where a seat was last filled by a member of a registered party, any vacancy shall be filled by another member nominated by that party (without a by-election).

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

(2A) Provided that where the condition mentioned in subsection (2) is not met, a vacancy shall be filled by—

(a) a by-election, or

(b) such other method as the Secretary of State may prescribe in the order.'.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 151, in page 14, line 9, leave out 'or substitutes'.

No. 92, in page 14, line 10, leave out from 'substitutes' to end of line 11 and insert—

'(2A) The Secretary of State shall also provide a scheme for updating and replacing substitutes.'.

Mr. Mackinlay: Amendment No. 100 would write into the Bill the requirement that, if a vacancy occurs in the Assembly's membership, the vacancy shall be filled by a member of the party that had ownership—if I may use that term—of the seat at the time of the Assembly election. The Bill leaves the method of filling the vacancy vague. It gives the Secretary of State the discretion to fill the vacancy in the way that I have just outlined, or to hold a by-election, or to use some other method.

Now that we have had considerable discussion of this Bill and the earlier Northern Ireland (Elections) Bill, it is time that we clarified how vacancies are to be filled. Vacancies will inevitably occur, and there must be clarity and precision on the matter now. In our discussions on the earlier Bill, the Minister implied that the Government would have resolved the matter by the time this Bill reached the House. I do not complain about the fact that they have not moved forward since then, but it is appropriate now that we resolve that vacancies shall automatically be filled by members of the same party as previously held the seat.

My amendment also provides for circumstances in which that condition cannot be fulfilled—for example, because the member was an independent. Only then would a by-election be the correct method of filling the vacancy. That is a common-sense approach.

In our earlier debates, we drew attention to the fact that, under the proposed electoral system, a perverse situation could arise where a member of the nationalist minority lost the seat in a constituency where there was a numerical majority for the Unionist persuasion. If a by-election were held, the Unionist persuasion would inevitably win, which would be a source of considerable irritation, and demonstrably unfair. The opposite could happen in a constituency with a nationalist majority, where someone of the Unionist persuasion might feel unfairly treated.

We used as an analogy the European Parliament seat of Northern Ireland. If, for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) had sought the presidency of the Irish Republic and got it, there would have been a vacancy. If there had subsequently been a by-election for the European Parliament, the seat would have been won by someone of the Unionist persuasion. That is a matter of fact. The absence of a provision such as I am outlining would create enormous difficulties.

With respect to the Secretary of State, I believe that we must resolve the matter now, rather than some weeks or months down the road. Such a vacancy could occur at any time. Numbers are critical to all parties in the Assembly, as we see from the complicated criteria for votes. I hope that the Minister will be persuaded that my amendment improves the Bill.

Rev. Ian Paisley: When the elections were held, each candidate had to list in order a number of persons whom he would want to fill the seat if anything happened to him. What is the use of such a list, if there is no intention of using it? When I was fighting the election and I was asked who would get the seat if anything happened to me, I could refer to the list that I had drawn up.

10.15 am

Mr. Mackinlay: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is correct. One of the up-sides of the electoral system is that, if the amendment is adopted, it will be clear who the substitute, the suppliant or the alternative member will be. It is good for the electorate to understand that.

That is the principle envisaged for future European elections in England, Wales and Scotland. The same also applies, I think, to Northern Ireland, but I need to check that. At the next European parliamentary elections on a multi-member constituency basis, the intention is that there will not be by-elections. If a vacancy occurs, a replacement will be supplied from the existing ranking order of the party list. That seems sensible.

Rev. Ian Paisley: There was nothing in the legislation to deal with the Northern Ireland single transferable vote system. There would be by-elections. I agree with the hon. Gentleman in this sense: if anything happened to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), for example and a vacancy arose, there is no way, on an ordinary vote, that a member of the Unionist family would not take that seat. That is unfair. Under those circumstances, the seat should be retained by a member of the same party as held it previously. However, that was not touched on by the legislation that deals with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hesitated because I thought that, perversely, Northern Ireland was the exception in European Union legislation. I trespass on that merely to buttress my argument that England, Wales and Scotland will have the arrangements that I propose in my amendment. It is profoundly sensible and I hope that it commends itself to the Committee.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I concur with the call for clarification of the matter. The appropriate time for that was before the election to the Assembly, when the situation was extremely vague. The Secretary of State by an order brought into play the substitute system. Many of us would prefer by-elections, if a by-election could produce a fair result.

If the Assembly is to be frozen for four years, that ensures that no matter what changes take place in the community, the Assembly is cut off from them. If by-elections do not occur because of the substitute system, no account is taken of changes that occur democratically in society. That is one of the dangers of the proposed system.

If a party that was in the minority in a constituency lost the seat through resignation or by some other means, it would have little or no chance of winning it in a by-election, and would therefore be disadvantaged for the remainder of that term.

Alongside the amendment, we must consider our earlier discussion of the designation of political parties. I think that the Government should reconsider the provision.

Under the substitute system, the party did not have control of the substitutes: it was the candidate who had that control. Some put in more than others, but they were in complete control of who their substitutes were. Suppose that a candidate was elected as a Member representing one political party but transferred his allegiance to another. I am sure that he would wish to change his substitutes, who would be members of the party with which he had previously been aligned. There must be some provision for that, and such provision does not at present exist within the Secretary of State's New Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order. Amendment No. 92 is, to a large extent, a probing amendment to give those on the Government Front Bench the opportunity to say that the Secretary of State will modify the order to allow for the natural change that may take place over time.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the electorate should have some rights in these matters and that, if there is to be substitute provision, the names of those persons who are likely to be appointed should also be made known to the electorate at the time of the election?

Mr. Robinson: It is my recollection that the chief electoral officer indicated that the names of those persons would be available at the polling stations. However, when I went to vote I never saw any of the names of substitutes at the polling station. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that the electorate have a right to know. It could be a circuitous route to get an unelectable individual into the Assembly. A popular person might stand with an unelectable individual as his substitute. He may be elected and then hand the seat over to that substitute. I suppose that that is possible. I agree that the electorate have the right to know.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the Bill is turning back the tide of electoral reform to a pocket borough situation?

Mr. Robinson: Many arguments can be advanced against the substitute system, but I do not see a better option if we are to have a system that provides for multi-Member constituencies. In those circumstances, it is the best that can be made of the system. That is what makes me rather concerned about the option that the Secretary of State seems to leave open within the clause, which refers to

"such other method of filling vacancies as the Secretary of State thinks fit."

It is my recollection that those words, or words similar to them, are in earlier legislation. Yet since then the Secretary of State has come down in favour of a substitute system, which is in play. However, the right hon. Lady still wants to maintain the option of changing the rules of the game somewhere down the line.

We either have by-elections or we have substitutes: an unknown alternative which the Secretary of State wants to keep close to her chest is unacceptable. That provision should be deleted so that we run with the two options available to us, with the Secretary of State redefining the order to ensure that there can be updating. That updating does not take place simply because a Member has changed his party. A substitute may have died or may have made known their intention not to take up a seat. That would force us into by-elections unless those substitutes were replaced. For the good working of the Assembly, it is appropriate that the order should be updated to take into account the possibilities to which I have referred.

Dr. Godman: With your permission, Sir Alan, I shall speak to amendment No. 151. I shall not detain the Committee for long because there is little support for my views in this instance. My hon. Friends the Members for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), for South Down (Mr. McGrady) and for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) disagree utterly and completely with my view that vacancies should be filled only by way of by-elections. My hon. Friend the Member for South Down pointed out to me that substitutes are the case for local elections in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North reminded me that Norway and Sweden have provisions for substitutes. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock reminded me, in a not very gentle way, that I had voted for a similar system for the European Parliament elections. Nevertheless, despite this inconsistency, my view is that, in an ideal world, vacancies in any sort of Assembly, whether local authority Assembly or Parliament, should be filled by way of a by-election.

The hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) asked in an intervention, "What about the concerns of the electorate?" We have experienced in recent years in Scotland the disaffection of the electorate with the Labour party in by-elections. All parties suffer that fate; it is not peculiar to the Scottish Labour party. I acknowledge the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, but it is my view that we should aim for vacancies being filled eventually by by-elections. That is the position in the Irish Republic, which has a similar electoral system for its long-established Parliament. I would perhaps go along with the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), who said that there should just be the alternatives of substitutes or by-elections rather than the clause giving powers to the Secretary of State.

The helpful guidance notes state:

"The thinking behind a system of substitutes is based on the impact of vacancies in a system combining election by a multi-member STV system and an Assembly based on the principles of proportionality."

I can understand that, but it still seems to me that we must take into consideration the views of the electorate. I correct slightly what my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said about the Scottish system in comparison with what is proposed for Northern Ireland. I refer to the Scottish system in terms of comparative evidence. There is a different electoral system for our Scottish Parliament. Clause 8 of the Scotland Bill provides for constituency by-elections and clause 9 refers to

"where the seat of a regional member is vacant."

My hon. Friend is correct to some extent because clause 9 provides that a vacancy in a regional Member seat that had been allocated to a registered political party will be filled by the nomination of another person from the same party list. However, that party list is known. That answers the concern that has been voiced in this context.

[Dr. Godman]

My only support comes from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe), who is not in her place at the moment.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) sends her apologies to my hon. Friend. She has a meeting at the Scottish Office.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The name of my hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill is appended to amendment No. 151.

It seems that I am perhaps being over-idealistic in advocating that vacancies should be filled only by by-elections. I am keenly aware of the social, political and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland. However, as an old-fashioned democrat, I believe that we should aim for a system whereby vacancies are filled only by by-elections. At the end of the day, we have to win the consent of the people whom we seek to govern.

From time to time, the local electorate may become disaffected with a party, its policies and practices. In between elections, the electorate should be given the right to demonstrate how they feel about a party. If, God forbid, there were to be a by-election shortly in Greenock and Inverclyde, it would be a by-election with a number of candidates representing different parties. That is the ideal for which we should aim in all assemblies—not just within the multinational state that we call the United Kingdom, but everywhere.

I make no apologies for detaining the Committee briefly, even though I know that I have no support from my hon. Friends. I have difficulties with the single transferable vote system. Even the Scottish system has difficulties, but it is a hell of a lot better than the system in Northern Ireland. The regional list of registered members of political parties will be known to the Scottish electorate. If there is a vacancy in a constituency where someone won under the first-past-the-post rules, there will, rightly and properly, be a by-election to fill that vacancy.

I stick to my guns, although I acknowledge the serious concerns of my hon. Friends at my advocacy of the system. However, one day, I hope that, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, vacancies will be filled by the tried and trusted procedure of a by-election. That way, we meet four-square the concerns, expectations, needs and desires of the electorate. At the end of the day, the electorate must reign supreme over elections.

10.30 am

Mr. Öpik: This is something of a triumph for the Liberal Democrats. Just over a year ago, we had no proportional representation at all. Now it looks as if Britain will have every kind of PR we can think of. I thank the Government on behalf of my party.

It is necessary to have clarification now, rather than leaving the matter to a point when we are faced with a by-election. The more specific and objective that we can be about the rules, the less likely it will be that we shall have problems later. I was impressed by the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), which tries to clarify the process, rather than leaving it to a decision as and when we need one.

Having said that, there are problems with any system that we propose. If we depend on substitutes, we are under an obligation to make sure that those substitutes are known. As with Scotland and Wales, it is clear that, in a regional list system, the substitutes should be clearly defined and advertised by the parties. My understanding is the same as that of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson)—very few people, if anybody, knew who the substitutes were when the elections took place in Northern Ireland. Whatever else we do, we must make sure that that situation is amended for future elections.

The substitute system is not so much of a problem in Wales or Scotland because the system is rather different. In Wales and Scotland, the first-past-the-post system will be used for individual constituencies and the list system for regional constituencies. STV presents a rather different problem.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman)—not so much because of social or political concerns in Northern Ireland, but because of practical concerns about the spirit of proportional representation. That spirit would not be achieved if we simply had a by-election in the simplest form in a multi-seat constituency. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's intention, which is a form of democratic purism, but it would not be achieved by a by-election. An individual by-election—depending on how it is organised—is unlikely to uphold the principle of proportionality in a multi-seat constituency. I am sure that some colleagues could think of a formula that would correct that, but I shall leave that to the anoraks.

Dr. Godman: What I suggest is not in any way a panacea. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that, in the Irish Republic not so long ago, the Irish Labour party won seats in by-elections in two constituencies, causing some difficulties for the Administration? There are difficulties with every kind of system. It might be democratic purism, but the concept of vacancies being filled by by-elections is long established.

Mr. Öpik: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and in fact Liberal Democrats tend to poll better in first-past-the-post by-elections to this Chamber. It is a workable system, and I have no objections to it in principle. I am looking at it from a practical consideration of proportionality. We have a difference in judgment. We could formulate a system of by-elections in Northern Ireland that would achieve everything that the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde and the rest of us want—a fair system of filling vacancies that maintains the principle of proportionality. However, in my judgment, it is hard to see how that can happen, given the multi-seat STV process that we have in place. We must then add the secondary point of the political sensitivities in Northern Ireland, which are not quite so prevalent in, for example, the Republic of Ireland.

A system of by-elections could create problems, and we would have to be explicit about the terms. For example, the Winchester by-election was called because the original result was regarded as nullified or unsafe. The majority was two, and it was decided that more than two votes could not be reliably considered to have fallen one way or the other. If we followed the process recommended by the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde, we would have to be explicit about the context of the by-elections, and when they would be acceptable

or unacceptable. Needless to say, there could be a lot of acrimony in any such situation, and we would need to fall back on objective facts. The Winchester by-election involved a great deal of time in the courts. That could create even more frictions if it were to occur in Northern Ireland.

Ministers should consider seriously the clarifications that are being proposed. If we do not have a more objective system in the Bill, it will be a recipe for trouble. It is inevitable that, if a by-election is called and we do not have objective criteria, vested interests will cause acrimony and conflict. That may obscure the true intent of the by-election, which is to fill a vacancy in the Assembly. There is an urgency now, and I hope that we can receive objective clarification of how we proceed. We must not wait for the first by-election to become a hostage to fortune and descend into potential conflict of exactly the type that we are seeking to avoid.

Mr. McGrady: Thank you, Mr. Martin, for allowing me to participate in the debate.

The question before the Committee is how properly, adequately and continually to represent to the views of the electorate. For Northern Ireland, another overriding consideration is added to that: we desire an Administration who represent a deep cross-section of our community and a system which enables minority groupings to have political expression and representation. That is the basis on which we should be approaching the structures and the way in which people are elected to them.

We have not only proportional representation, which is the foundation of such a model, but six-member constituencies, which is a high number per constituency. The purpose is to ensure the maximum possible representation of a broad political spectrum. We should keep those two principles in mind, because they should be the yardstick by which we measure the filling of vacancies. Under PR, minority grouping representation could go out of the window in by-elections because, by the mathematics of the situation, the largest party in any constituency will inevitably win every by-election. In England, there may be a swing from one side to the other, but there have not been dramatic swings in Northern Ireland since it came into existence in 1920, so representation by minority groupings would be withdrawn from the electorate.

A Member may change party allegiance during his term of office. Notwithstanding that, the electorate would still have elected a person on a party ticket. If allegiance were transferred, that would be the fault of the representative, who would deny those who voted for him and for his party or philosophy.

On substitution, it is intriguing that participants in the Assembly elections were required in their nomination papers to nominate a maximum of six substitutes. As I recall, that was not a legal requirement, but it was a legal opportunity. The electorate could and should have made themselves aware of whether substitutes were of the same temperament or of the same political party or philosophy as the primary candidate. They made their decisions on the basis of candidates' nomination papers and their nominated substitutes, so what is the legal situation and what would it be if we made a change?

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) said that I have already reminded him of this practical point, but I must do so again: in the 26 district councils in Northern Ireland, which are also elected by PR, it is the norm to fill a vacancy by substitution, through the nomination of the party whose representative previously occupied that elected position. Indeed, I can recall no recent by-elections. The community already accepts and operates—

Dr. Godman *rose—*

Rev. Ian Paisley *rose—*

Mr. McGrady: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde.

Dr. Godman: I think that I was first to ask.

I readily acknowledge that my hon. Friend presents a powerful case for substitutes, but does he agree with clause 27(2)? It states:

"Such provision may be made by reference to by-elections or substitutes or such other method of filling vacancies as the Secretary of State thinks fit."

Does he think that we should we have by-elections or substitutes, not a three-options system?

Mr. McGrady: I now give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley).

Rev. Ian Paisley: Although such a system may be the norm, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there has to be unanimity in the council chamber, and that, if anyone objects to not holding a by-election, he overrules the council? The hon. Gentleman will agree, because he has wide experience of local government, that holding an election, perhaps six months before the whole council went to the electorate, would throw the electorate into spending a lot of money.

10.45 am

Mr. McGrady: The hon. Gentleman has made a helpful contribution, which is unusual in my experience. To take the point further, in multi-party council chambers, there is usually agreement across the parties that vacancies should be filled through substitution by the party that has a vacancy. That has been the norm in local government for about a decade; there is nothing unusual or unacceptable about it, and it has cross-party support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde referred to clause 27(2). I probed this matter earlier; substitutes have already been nominated in the electoral process, and his question is difficult to answer because we need clarification of the legal situation. If the current legal position is to continue, how can we make changes midstream when the electorate have already cast their votes?

There is much validity in all the arguments about filling vacancies, but I draw the attention of the Committee to the fact that we are basing our decision on the special circumstances of Northern Ireland. We are endeavouring to achieve the greatest participation by the greatest number of parties and philosophies. The tenor of the Bill is based on cross-community, cross-party support for the

[Mr. McGrady]

way forward. In that context, substitution, as predicated by the electoral process, is probably best, although I hope that there will be evolution as time goes on.

Mr. McNamara: I thank you, Mr. Martin, for calling me to speak after my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), not after the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). I woke up this morning saying, "X is equal to minus B, plus or minus the square root of B squared, minus 4AC, all over 2A—or is it?" I did not want to go back to using squared paper.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman's membership card is in the post.

Mr. McNamara: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman means a Mensa membership. I can remember mensa, mensam, mensae, mensa, but that is thanks to the Irish Christian Brothers, not the academicals attended by the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) demolished his own case. He considered all the examples and everything that had been said, and was left hanging on to the straw of what happens in the Irish Republic. There is considerable difference between what happens in the Irish Republic and what is happening in Northern Ireland. First, people in the Republic vote for a sovereign Government, not for a devolved Assembly. The second and more important difference is that, by and large, candidates in the Republic of Ireland accept the political institutions and the allegiances to, and sovereignty of, the state. That does not apply in Northern Ireland, and the agreement recognises that in its references to citizenship.

In our electoral system, parties divide on a class or ideological basis—if one is able to talk in those terms nowadays—and, especially in Northern Ireland, according to allegiances. The proportional system was introduced in Northern Ireland specifically to allow allegiances, and differences of opinion within those allegiances, to be adequately represented. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Down has said, if we change to a system of by-elections, the majority in a particular constituency could take the day. I shall refer only obliquely and briefly to last night's debate, Mr. Martin. If that were to happen, it would mean challenging the acceptance of the whole basis of the d'Hondt system.

That brings us back to the question whether a person in the new Northern Ireland Assembly should be able to cross the Floor, to change party or to change designation if that would upset the arrangements under which the elections took place. The electorate vote for candidates for a particular purpose. People vote for the Democratic Unionist party, the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Unionist party or the Alliance party knowing where that party stands on constitutional, social, political and economic matters, and believing that, if the successful candidate died, someone from the list of substitutes would take that person's place on the basis of his allegiances and his known stance.

If we do not have substitutes and if we give the Secretary of State the discretion provided in the Bill—although she will have to bring the orders before the House for resolution—we shall be leaving matters up in the air. The most sensible thing to do is for the Secretary of State to adopt the proposition of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock either in a new clause or a new schedule outlining the specific means of substitution. We should also specify what should happen if a person crosses the Floor or changes his political allegiance.

The position in Northern Ireland is different. People are elected not only for their innate qualities—I am sure that that applies to every Member of this august Assembly—but for their political allegiances and their understanding of how that can affect matters in the overall body of the Assembly. That is of the utmost importance.

Dr. Godman: I have never denied the strength of the case put by my hon. Friends the Members for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and for South Down (Mr. McGrady). I am sorry that my hon. Friend for Hull, North thinks that my view that the electorate should reign supreme hangs by a straw. I think that he was referring to the example, which I used to strengthen my case, of what happens in the Republic. Does my hon. Friend think that the reference to by-elections in clause 27(2) or the phrase

"such other method of filling vacancies"

should be deleted?

Mr. McNamara: I think that both should be deleted. I suggest that the Secretary of State, either in a new clause or in a new schedule—the latter is probably the best place—should outline the precise system and should say how substitution should be treated when a person crosses the floor. It is important that the electorate should not be misled. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde said that I do not believe that the people are sovereign. I hope that he will support my ten-minute Bill on Wednesday, which will show that the people are sovereign on membership of the House. However, we are talking about a devolved Assembly that will be elected, we hope, for a fixed period. People will know what is happening and will seek to ensure that their views are represented in a particular way. That is best achieved by a system of substitutes, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will table an amendment in the other place to meet the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock and others.

Mr. Paul Murphy: The debate, which was initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), has been interesting and useful. Schedule 14 to the Bill provides that the New Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order 1998 remains in force after the appointed day. If a vacancy occurred, it would be filled by a substitute from the list submitted by a candidate at the 25 June elections.

Much of the debate has centred on the principle of substitutes versus by-elections. During the consideration of the previous Bill dealing with this matter, there was no doubt that a system of substitutes must inevitably be the one we use. I agree with the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), who said that, for the system of elections to the Assembly, there is no real alternative to the use of substitutes in order to maintain proportionality and the important cross-community aspects of the Assembly. The Government propose to ensure that the substitute system remains.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock wanted more detail included in the Bill. His amendment refers to registered political parties. We shall see what impact the Registration of Political Parties Bill has on Northern Ireland. We shall have to consult political parties in Northern Ireland on that matter.

We can make any necessary changes to the system of substitution in future through an amendment to the New Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order 1998, to which the hon. Member for Belfast, East referred. Under the provisions of schedule 14, that will continue to apply to elections to the Assembly. I propose to discuss this matter further with the parties, because I know that they regard it as an important issue. There is the matter of by-elections being held if substitutes die or do not wish to take up their place. We shall have further consultation on that. It may require changes, although not necessarily to the Bill.

Mr. Peter Robinson: The Minister referred to by-elections and to the substitute system. What was in the Government's mind when they added the rider

"or such other method of filling vacancies as the Secretary of State thinks fit"?

Mr. Murphy: That is exactly why we need to consult further. It is unclear. We should consider how we deal with by-elections if a substitute does not want to take up his seat, dies or moves away. Because of the lack of clarity, we need to talk with parties in Northern Ireland. Changes could be made by order and not necessarily by amendments to the Bill. I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Mackinlay: I hope to hear further news from the Minister over the summer. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 27 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 28

DISQUALIFICATION

Rev. Ian Paisley: I beg to move amendment No. 93, in clause 28, page 14, leave out lines 32 to 34.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 21, in page 14, leave out lines 38 to 41.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The amendment deals with an interest that Northern Ireland and its people expressly have, in that Ministers of the Crown, as they may well be called under the new system, may also be nominated by the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic and take their seats in the Senate of the Irish Republic. It is not consistent that a Minister of the Crown in one part of the United Kingdom should take a seat in the Senate.

It being Eleven o'clock, THE FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings).*

First World War (Executions)

11 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): With permission, I will make a statement about executions of soldiers and others in the first world war.

I doubt whether anyone who has not gone through the awesome experience of war can ever truly imagine its effects on the emotions of human beings. Some 9 million troops from all sides died during the great war. Almost 1 million British and Empire soldiers fell, heroes to their nations and a testimony to the awfulness of war.

We rightly remember them still, not only on the 11th of November, but in ceremonies throughout the year and throughout the globe. Today, I am sure that I am joined by the whole House in once again paying tribute to the courage and fortitude of all who served from throughout Britain and the Empire.

For some of our soldiers and their families, however, there has been neither glory nor remembrance. Just over 300 of them died at the hands not of the enemy, but of firing squads from their own side. They were shot at dawn, stigmatised and condemned—a few as cowards, most as deserters. The nature of those deaths and the circumstances surrounding them have long been a matter of contention. Therefore, last May, I said that we would look again at their cases.

The review has been a long and complicated process, and I have today placed a summary in the Library of the House. I will outline some salient features.

Between 4 August 1914 and 31 March 1920, approximately 20,000 personnel were convicted of military offences under the British Army Act for which the death penalty could have been awarded. That does not include civilian capital offences such as murder. Of those 20,000, something over 3,000 were actually sentenced to death. Approximately 90 per cent. of them escaped execution. They had their sentences commuted by their commanders in chief.

The remainder, those executed for a military offence, number some 306 cases in all. That is just 1 per cent. of those tried for a capital offence, and 10 per cent. of those actually sentenced to death. Those 300 or so cases can be examined, because the records were preserved. In virtually all other cases, the records were destroyed. It is the cases of those 300 that many hon. Members, notably my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), and others outside the House, including the Royal British Legion, have asked us to reconsider with a view to some form of blanket pardon.

Let me make it plain that we cannot and do not condone cowardice, desertion, mutiny or assisting the enemy—then or now. They are all absolutely inimical to the very foundation of our armed forces. Without military discipline, the country could not be defended, and that is never more important than in times of war.

However, the circumstances of the first world war, and the long-standing controversy about the executions, justify particular consideration. We have therefore reviewed every aspect of the cases. We have considered the legal basis for the trials—field general courts martial. The review has confirmed that procedures for the courts martial were correct, given the law as it stood at the time.

[Dr. John Reid]

The review also considered medical evidence. Clearly, if those who were executed could be medically examined now, it might be judged that the effects of their trauma meant that some should not have been considered culpable; but we cannot examine them now. We are left with only the records, and in most cases there is no implicit or explicit reference in the records to nervous, or other psychological or medical, disorders. Moreover, while it seems reasonable to assume that medical considerations may have been taken into account in the 90 per cent. of cases where sentences were commuted, there is no direct evidence of that, either, as almost all the records of those commuted cases have long since been destroyed.

However frustrating, the passage of time means that the grounds for a blanket legal pardon on the basis of unsafe conviction just do not exist. We have therefore considered the cases individually.

A legal pardon, as envisaged by some, could take one of three forms: a free pardon, a conditional pardon, or a statutory pardon. We have given very serious consideration to this matter. However, the three types of pardon have one thing in common—for each individual case, there must be some concrete evidence for overturning the decision of a legally constituted court, which was charged with examining the evidence in those serious offences.

I have personally examined one third of the records—approximately 100 personal case files. It was a deeply moving experience. Regrettably, many of the records contain little more than the minimum prescribed for this type of court martial—a form recording administrative details and a summary—not a transcript—of the evidence. Sometimes it amounts only to one or two handwritten pages.

I have accepted legal advice that, in the vast majority of cases, there is little to be gleaned from the fragments of the stories that would provide serious grounds for a legal pardon. Eighty years ago, when witnesses were available and the events were fresh in their memories, that might have been a possibility, but the passage of time has rendered it well-nigh impossible in most cases.

So, if we were to pursue the option of formal, legal pardons, the vast majority, if not all, of the cases would be left condemned either by an accident of history which has left us with insufficient evidence to make a judgment, or, even where the evidence is more extensive, by a lack of sufficient evidence to overturn the original verdicts. In short, most would be left condemned, or in some cases re-condemned, 80 years after the event.

I repeat here what I said last May when I announced the review—that we did not wish, by addressing one perceived injustice, to create another. I wish to be fair to all, and, for that reason I do not believe that pursuing possible individual formal legal pardons for a small number, on the basis of impressions from the surviving evidence, will best serve the purpose of justice or the sentiment of Parliament. The point is that now, 80 years after the events and on the basis of the evidence, we cannot distinguish between those who deliberately let down their country and their comrades in arms and those who were not guilty of desertion or cowardice.

Current knowledge of the psychological effects of war, for example, means that we now accept that some injustices may have occurred. Suspicions cannot be completely allayed by examination of the sparse records. We have therefore decided also to reject the option of those who have urged us to leave well alone and to say nothing. To do nothing, in the circumstances, would be neither compassionate nor humane.

Today, there are four things that we can do in this House, which sanctioned and passed the laws under which these men were executed. First, with the knowledge now available to us, we can express our deep sense of regret at the loss of life. There remain only a very few of our fellow countrymen who have any real understanding or memory of life and death in the trenches and on the battlefields of the first world war. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the war, and we are recalling and remembering the conditions of that war, and all those who endured them, both those who died at the hands of the enemy, and those who were executed. We remember, too, those who did their awful duty in the firing squads.

Secondly, in our regret, and as we approach a new century, let us remember that pardon implies more than legality and legal formality. Pardon involves understanding, forgiveness, tolerance and wisdom. I trust that hon. Members will agree that, while the passage of time has distanced us from the evidence and the possibility of distinguishing guilt from innocence, and has rendered the formality of pardon impossible, it has also cast great doubt on the stigma of condemnation.

If some men were found wanting, it was not because they all lacked courage, backbone or moral fibre. Among those executed were men who had bravely volunteered to serve their country. Many had given good and loyal service. In a sense, those who were executed were as much victims of the war as the soldiers and airmen who were killed in action, or who died of wounds or disease, like the civilians killed by aerial or naval bombardment, or like those who were lost at sea. As the 20th century draws to a close, they all deserve to have their sacrifice acknowledged afresh. I ask hon. Members to join me in recognising those who were executed for what they were—the victims, with millions of others, of a cataclysmic and ghastly war.

Thirdly, we hope that others outside the House will recognise all that, and that they will consider allowing the missing names to be added to books of remembrance and war memorials throughout the land.

Finally, there is one other thing that we can do as we look forward to a new millennium. The death penalty is still enshrined in our military law for five offences, including misconduct in action and mutiny. I can tell the House that Defence Ministers will invite Parliament to abolish the death penalty for military offences in the British armed forces in peace and in war. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

There are deeply held feelings about the executions. Eighty years after those terrible events, we have tried to deal with a sensitive issue as fairly as possible for all those involved. In remembrance of those who died in the war, the poppy fields of Flanders became a symbol for the shattered innocence and the shattered lives of a lost generation. May those who were executed, with the many, many others who were victims of war, finally rest in

peace. Let all of us who have inherited the world that followed remember with solemn gratitude, the sacrifices of those who served that we might live in peace.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I thank the Minister for generously allowing me a copy of his statement and the background information well in advance. He spoke with great understanding and sensitivity about a war that took place 80 years ago. There is probably no man or woman in the House whose father, grandfather or great-grandfather did not serve in the first world war. Many will have been wounded or killed. I was in the minority; both my grandfathers came back from the war. We should remember that a generation of Members of Parliament also served in that war, with great suffering. I think in particular of both the Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

The British soldiers who were executed during that war have been subject to great debate over the past 80 years. The Minister rightly pointed out that there have been numerous internal and external Government inquiries. Before 1994, all Governments refused to release the case files and other documentation for public access, thereby creating a suspicion in some people's minds of a cover-up. I hope that the Minister's statement will leave no suspicion of a conspiracy or cover-up on a highly sensitive issue.

The matter has recently been brought to a head by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who has pursued it since 1992 with early-day motions and a private Member's Bill. All hon. Members recognise the hon. Gentleman's great interest in the matter. In February 1993, when he was Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) rejected the hon. Gentleman's call for a pardon for those who were executed. Members who were here will recall that my right hon. Friend spoke with a great deal of sensitivity, advancing arguments similar to those of the Minister for the Armed Forces.

My right hon. Friend's Government's decision was based on a detailed, two-stage study of the files—first selective, then comprehensive—between 1992 and 1994 by the Army historical branch of the Ministry of Defence. I pay tribute to the men and women of that branch for their hard work in difficult circumstances. Their studies reached basically the same conclusions on legal and medical evidence that the Minister has outlined today.

On 16 September 1995, the office of the then Leader of the Opposition—now Prime Minister—announced that a future Labour Government would consider the matter sympathetically. The Minister, when in opposition, signed an early-day motion calling for a review. In May 1997, the Minister announced his review, and he has taken a personal interest in the matter, considering the cases himself and holding discussions with many legal and medical experts and historians.

The Minister's conclusions are virtually the same as those of the previous Government, but there are two differences. First, he has pushed for greater transparency. The previous Government began to move towards that, but he has continued it, and we should all welcome the move. Secondly, he has concluded, as he put to the House today, that, having reviewed the evidence, he faced three options. The first was a legal pardon, the second was the status quo and the third was an expression of regret.

Like previous Governments, the Minister has rejected the legal pardon. He finds the status quo unacceptable, and has opted for an expression of regret. I fear that the Minister may not satisfy two perhaps large groups of opinion. I may be assuming in advance the views of the hon. Member for Thurrock, who I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be lucky enough to catch your eye, but he has, of course, always argued for a pardon. Equally, there are those, including me and others, who believe that the status quo—leave history alone—is perhaps the option that we should still consider.

The status quo is not about indifference or callousness; I do not think that anyone who has looked at these questions can believe that. I have to declare a personal interest here: as a military historian 20 years ago, I interviewed dozens of surviving soldiers of the first world war on this issue and many others. There is a recognition of the impossibility of rewriting history. Among British soldiers at the time—I know that the Minister found this when he interviewed some of the very few surviving veterans—to say the least, there was an ambivalent attitude to the whole question of executing soldiers for desertion or mutiny.

Expressions of regret can become so generalised as to appear meaningless. I am not by any means implying that the Minister is trying to do that, but my fear is that we will end up setting a precedent. Last year, the Prime Minister expressed regret over the Irish potato famine, an action which many people agreed with. However, we have to consider: where does this begin and end?

I say in all seriousness: are we to consider giving expressions of regret for those people who were executed in the highlands after the battle of Culloden by forces of the Crown? Are we to express regret for those people who were executed by forces of the Crown after the Indian mutiny? Those are questions that involve our looking back into history and making value judgments. My fear is that the Minister's statement has not drawn a line under this issue.

Every hon. Member will stand in awe of those men and women who endured so much, so that we today can debate this issue. In particular, I stand in awe of all those hundreds of thousands of men and women who, in the face of the most appalling circumstances, controlled and conquered their fear and did their duty, so that we might live in a democracy, as we do today.

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) for what I think was a cautious, though at times cynical, welcome of the statement; perhaps I misinterpreted it. I join him in thanking the Army historical branch and the services for all their work. I want to put it on the record that, despite the rumours that accompany such reviews from time to time, there was no resistance whatever to a full and transparent, academic and compassionate review of these cases from the forces, which have been of immeasurable assistance to me in attempting, after all these years, to do justice to a complicated issue.

Of course I join the hon. Gentleman in recognising the sacrifices of all those who died, which I recognised at the top of my statement. We in the House owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to those who went over the top, fought in the battlefields and made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. We promised at the end of that

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awful war that, through the generations, we would not forget them, and we have not done so. Today we pay tribute to them as well.

However, I did point out that there were certain people—306 people—whose families had suffered a stigma for eight decades. I feel that, in the light of what we know, it was the view of the House as a whole that I was expressing when I said that that stigma should be lifted, and that those people should be recognised as victims. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

May I deal with the point that the hon. Gentleman raised about not rewriting history? I did not use that expression—it was used by the previous Government—because I do not believe it. History has two meanings. One is what actually happened. Of course we cannot help what actually happened, or change it, but history has another meaning, which, as an historian, I recognise and which I thought that he, as an historian, would recognise as well. It is the interpretation of what happened.

In all fields of life, we constantly revise our interpretation of what happened. I argue, as a human being as well as a politician, and partly as an historian, that not only is it open to us to reinterpret the events, but, in a decent civilised society, we have an obligation to reinterpret those events. That is what have I tried to do.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned various other executions throughout history. I think that there is a difference. These events occurred within living memory—this century. I think that I am right in saying that, in the period before 1914, as far back as the Napoleonic wars, there were no more than two executions under these same Acts. From 1918 until today, I do not think that there have been any more than three. In the whole of the second world war, I think that there were three executions for mutiny and one for a capital offence which was not a military offence. Therefore, these events are specific—I think that they are ring-fenced. The conditions and nature of the first world war distinguish it from all other wars.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has read of the awful conditions, the extremes of cold and heat, the mud, the vermin, the lice, the cacophony of shellfire, the amazing barrage under which human beings were put, whose batteries of courage were constantly being tested to the limit. The conditions of that war do make it somewhat different.

On the question of the individuals versus the group, I was asked to review these cases as a whole, and I have done so. I said, not only last May but in the debate in the House, which I have here, that that would not necessarily mean a legal formal pardon, but, where there are apparent or possible injustices within living memory, it is the obligation of Government, particularly when people were involved in a life-and-death struggle, to do their best to express the sentiment of the House and the will of the nation.

If I have one wish, it is that, whatever the legal formality today, we do indeed create the conditions in which, as a nation, we can say to all those who died, including the executed soldiers and others, "May you rest in peace now." May this case also rest in peace: after all these decades, I believe that we have now finally done justice to the obligation to examine it and to dispense our view, and the public view, as fully as we possibly could.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Mackinlay: I sincerely thank the Minister for all his efforts in this regard, the attention that he has given to this matter, and his statement today. I couple that with thanks for the work of many people, but particularly His Honour Judge Anthony Babington, Julian Putkowski, who did research work in this regard, which has assisted all of us and promoted our interest in this issue, and, last but not least, Ernest Thurthle, who was a Labour Member of Parliament in the 1920s and 1930s and who alone raised this issue. We should remember him today, because he did a great deal in exposing the fact that the British establishment suppressed these documents for three quarters of a century.

I hope that the Minister will understand if I reserve my position in one regard. I think that there could have been a formal legal pardon, but there may be a legislative opportunity for me or others to raise the matter in future. However, it would be churlish and unrealistic not to acknowledge that what the Minister has said is a major statement by the Government, which I deeply appreciate and which I know will be appreciated by the families of the men involved, the people who have campaigned for them and the few remaining veterans of the great war. They, late in the evening of life, will know that not only do the people support the pardons—I think that they have done so all along—but that Parliament has now reflected the fact that they should be acknowledged as victims of the great war along with the many other millions.

In response to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), there was not an option to leave the matter alone. That is precisely what the British establishment wanted to do for 75 years. History needs to be written with clarity and precision, and I hope that the Minister feels that, with his statement, he has written a chapter of history with clarity and precision this morning.

With your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to point out that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) nudged me to draw attention to the fact that, at the very moment when the Minister was expressing regret, it was 11 minutes past 11. I thought that that added to a profoundly moving statement.

This certainly closes a chapter on a very unhappy episode. As we come to the end of a troubled century, when we teach our schoolchildren about the miscalculations and selfishness of politicians in general, we can at least take some pride this morning in the fact that the ordinary British soldier and the other victims of the great war have been given the long overdue acknowledgement that they were victims of the decisions of selfish people. I hope that we can salute them this morning.

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome and his kind words. I take this opportunity to thank Judge Anthony Babington, not only for his pioneering work in this generation but for the assistance that he gave me when I met him. I also thank others, including

Julian Putkowski for assisting me to clarify my own thoughts on this matter. Of course, I did not meet Ernest Thurthle, but I became very familiar with his thoughts and works as I worked through the review. To that list I would add my hon. Friend himself, who has played a pioneering role in the last decade. He has taken an interest in all things military in the House, as well as in the soldiers and others who were executed.

There is not much that I can add, other than to say that, as I read the case files, I appreciated the nature of war. No one could remain unmoved who reads about the conditions endured by the soldiers who died in the first world war, who went over the top and made the sacrifice, and who had what Napoleon regarded as the main characteristic of a good soldier—not courage, but endurance. I certainly did not. Some of the words come back to haunt me. The last words of one young man who was executed were, "What will my mother say?" Such instances cannot leave us unmarked.

I do not believe that it is a sign of fortitude or strength to ignore compassion. Compassion, as exemplified by millions of soldiers throughout the centuries and throughout this nation, is an integral part of fortitude. We are all the stronger for having compassion—defiance in defeat, certainly, but, as Churchill once said, magnanimity in victory. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to have the victory of life, and those who were fortunate enough, despite all their sacrifices, to come back, will share with the House the magnanimity and understanding of those who were executed during that terrible war.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), and thank the Minister for his courtesy in making this statement. I doubt whether a single hon. Member who heard the Minister's words could fail to be moved by what he had to say and the sincerity with which he said it. From the tone he used, I suspect that he was greatly disappointed in the words that he had to utter.

The statement contained the phrase that "formality of pardon" was impossible. I am sure that the Minister will agree that, when he replied to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), he used the words of compassion. I am sure that most men, women and children will think that compassion could have been shown to the 300 men and their families, and that the formality of pardon was not an impossibility. They will think that a society which, with the ability to look back and say that things would have been so different today, could have shown the compassion necessary to ensure that the pardon was not an impossibility. I am sure the Minister will agree that countless millions of people will not understand why it is impossible for the House to grant the pardon.

I am sure that every voice in the land will echo the sentiments that the Minister expressed in going over what these men went through. He recognised that the majority of them were volunteers and had been in action for a long time. He eloquently exposed the fear experienced by anyone placed in real danger, but these men were in danger day in and day out, week in and week out, for years in some instances.

The nation owes it to those men to show the compassion that is needed. Perhaps, just perhaps, some were guilty of the offences in question, but pardoning them in order to pardon them all is a price that the nation would willingly pay in order, once and for all, to lift this stain from our nation's military history. I hope that, even now, the words of the hon. Member for Thurrock will be taken up by other hon. Members, and that we shall introduce legislation that will finally remove this stain from our history.

It gives me great pleasure on behalf of my party to thank the Minister for his honest endeavours and determination in bringing us to this stage today, but please do not let this be the end of the story.

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman raised three points to which I shall respond. To pardon a few, or one or two—I have not said that, in my view, the evidence would have been sufficient for such a pardon; it might have been sufficient to consider it—thus in effect condemning 300, or 290, would not have been the compassionate response.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): All or none.

Dr. Reid: As the hon. Gentleman's hon. and learned Friend says, it is all or none.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) believes that some people will not understand. I think that they will understand perfectly, and I shall explain it in simple terms to the hon. Gentleman.

The people who died throughout this century in the British armed forces died fighting to preserve democracy. The basis of democracy is the rule of law. If any politician were to overturn not only several hundred years of precedent but the basis of that democracy by setting aside the belief that there has to be evidence for a conviction; or if he did so on a political whim or prejudice or on a suspicion, no matter how sincere, it would undermine the very basis of law and democracy for which so many millions have fought and died.

Therefore, I do not believe that it would have been open to me, without transgressing the very values for which so many service men have fought and died, to throw aside all legal precedent and make a judgment on the basis of what I believed rather than on the evidence. I think that that will be understood—it is understood in the House, and I think that it is understood across the country. But, short of that, I believe that I have done what the House would think is right.

The Government have not taken action and said what we said only because we thought that the House would think that it right to do so or because of this or that pressure group, but because we think it is the right thing to do. We have expressed regret and the view that—like all those who died—those people were victims of that terrible, terrible war. We have asked that the stigma of the executions be lifted and that those names be added to books of remembrance and memorials. We have also on this day announced that we will be inviting the House to abolish the death penalty. I think that those measures will be warmly welcomed by hon. Members and by the public.

I hope—for the benefit of the families and those who were executed—that we can now genuinely say, "Let them rest in peace". If individuals wish to petition on individual cases, I have not debarred anyone from doing so. My own belief is that they would not do a service for the whole or, I suspect, for the individual case—which, because of a lack of evidence, could end up with a

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re-condemnation. Such an outcome is what I tried to avoid, and I think—and hope—that the generality of the statement of regret will be warmly welcomed by the public.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We are considering a deeply moving matter, but the House will appreciate that I must protect the main business of the House. I shall call other hon. Members, but remind them that they must put a question to the Minister. That question should be brief. I shall try to call as many hon. Members as I can before we return to the main business of the House.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): May I join in thanking the Secretary of State—and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay)—for the very sensitive and imaginative way in which he has dealt with the matter? However, are we not speaking about a little bit more than the victims of war? Are we not speaking about the victims of the law, passed by Parliament, that conscripted young men and women who did not wish to fight and told them—under the then military code—"If you do not kill under orders, we will execute you"? They were victims of Parliament and of war, although the two were interconnected in that case. May I ask him also to recognise that the real victims today—for those who were shot have gone—are the families who have the anguish of knowing that their fathers, grandfathers, uncles and great-uncles died as convicted of cowardice?

In the light of Archbishop Tutu's institution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring out the truth and allow the past to rest in peace, could not the word "pardon" be used to recognise that—for the benefit of the families—those people really were not guilty of the military offence for which they were sentenced to death? I ask the Secretary of State to consider that proposal in the light of the families who suffer, still to this day, for what happened to those who went before.

Dr. Reid: I thank my right hon. Friend, especially for referring to me as the Secretary of State—but the reshuffle is not until next week.

My right hon. Friend raised some very serious points. I did use the word "pardon"—I used it several times, both in my statement and subsequently—and explained that it is more than a legal formality: it also means compassion and forgiveness. I hope that that has been noted by the families themselves.

Many of those who were executed were not conscripts but volunteers. I specifically drew attention to that fact. I specifically drew attention also to the House's role, by saying that it was appropriate that the Government are making the statement in the House that sanctioned the legislation—the Army Act 1914—under which the people were executed. I made that point because, ultimately, responsibility rests in this place. It is therefore appropriate that we should have made our expression of regret here.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join, on behalf of my colleagues, in thanking the Minister for his clear statement and for underlining in his last reply the fact that many of those people were volunteers—among whom were the men of Ulster. I suggest that, in compassion, the House should reflect on the difference between calm debates in this place—where we sometimes use passion—and the battlefield. When we think of the victims of those days, perhaps we should remember that their officers also were victims, having to uphold military discipline in extreme circumstances. Does the Minister share my belief—it is also my plea—that those who have been so treated in the past will now be restored, even in books of remembrance and war memorials, so that, across the nation, no one may withhold recognition of the pardon that we are seeking to make?

Dr. Reid: Yes, indeed. The hon. Gentleman speaks for a part of the United Kingdom that suffered and sacrificed on a par with any in our history. Ulstermen stood in the vanguard of the efforts of the British armed forces in the first world war—not only at the Somme but at other horrific events in that war. It is not in my power to direct or to dictate, but I do hope that their names will be added to war memorials and books of remembrance, as that will be a symbol of the lifting of the stigma of execution.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the officers—some of whom, too, were executed. The sentences of 89 per cent. of those who were sentenced to death were commuted by the higher chain of command—which should give pause for thought to those who claim that executions were merely a rubber-stamp process performed by a bloodthirsty officer corps. That is not borne out by reality. Although evidence from the files is missing, there are sufficient grounds for us to believe that great consideration was given to executions, and that—despite the need for discipline and to ensure that, for the benefit of the many, there were executions when such offences occurred—a great deal of compassion was shown throughout the chain of command.

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): With one other hon. Member, I represent the House on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. As I walk up and down those rows of graves—many of 16, 17, 18, 19-year-olds—I try to imagine the horror that must have gone through their minds at what they saw. It is not surprising that many of them deserted. Perhaps many more did not do so only because they died so quickly that they did not have a chance to appreciate the situation from which they would never escape.

I thank the Minister for his statement. On behalf of all those who now rest in Commonwealth war graves, I ask him whether he will now write to other Commonwealth countries and ask them to include the names of the comrades of those who died in that dreadful war on war memorials and war graves.

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to the work done by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Upkeep of those graves—particularly in France and Belgium, but elsewhere on the globe—is a tribute to the depth of feeling that we still have for all those who died in that war. She will know that no one who has walked through France and Belgium and seen the acres of white crosses around Arras, the Somme and the Ypres salient can come away without being profoundly affected by the experience.

As for the wider implications for the Commonwealth, I assure my hon. Friend that we have kept in touch with our Commonwealth colleagues as this issue has progressed. It is not within my power to direct other sovereign nations, but the remarks I have made today and the sentiments I have expressed were for all those who served in the British and Empire forces, and I have no doubt that they will be noted by our Commonwealth colleagues. I am sure that the whole House would welcome it if they decided that a similar course of action was appropriate in their case.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I, too, welcome today's statement by the Minister. I note the dignified manner in which he presented it, and the sombre mood in which the whole House has responded.

In thanking the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) for his tireless work on this case, may I say, also as an historian, that I do not believe that we can leave history alone? As an historian specialising in the history of the first world war, when teaching that history to youngsters who are far more accustomed to the virtual reality of Hollywood, I have discovered that the reality of man's inhumanity to man was something that they found extremely emotional. Perhaps in the process they recognised that we have to consider all our actions in society, and what they mean to all of us.

On the question of names being added to books of remembrance and war memorials, is it anticipated that that will happen by Remembrance Sunday this year? As a Scottish Member of Parliament, I am sure that the Minister will be keen to ensure that action is taken in respect of the Scottish national war memorial at Edinburgh castle.

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Lady. I cannot add anything to her comments about the first world war. The matter of war memorials and books of remembrance is not within my power to dictate, but I hope that the sentiments expressed in the House today are shared by those who do have power in such matters. I was pleased to read recently, as no doubt did the hon. Lady, that those responsible for the book of remembrance in Edinburgh castle have already decided to take action. I hope that their action is adopted as a more widespread practice.

I should add that, although we are concentrating on one aspect today, as I said in my statement and as I know the House feels, we remember and will never, ever forget the sacrifices made by those who died from the bullets or the bayonets of the enemy—those who found within themselves, in those awful conditions, the fortitude and courage to overcome fear, which afflicts all of us, and to go forward, sometimes into a hail of fire. We remember them today, as we shall on 11 November.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): In welcoming my hon. Friend's statement, and acknowledging the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, I should like also to recall the work of our former right hon. Friend and Member for Mansfield, Don Concannon. When he was first elected, he tried, desperately banging his head against the wall of the Ministry of Defence, to resurrect even the idea of re-examining these cases.

The most important and significant thing that my hon. Friend the Minister said today came in those few sentences at the end of his statement, when he ensured that this would never happen again. May I say how much I welcome his statement that no longer will capital punishment be seen as a punishment within the British military code? By that decision, we shall never again make any of the sort of mistakes that may well have been made in the past.

Dr. Reid: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the endurance over a long period of Don Concannon, who, if I remember correctly, was a former guardsman and who took a great personal as well as academic interest in these matters.

I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about the abolition of the death penalty. Lest there be any doubt, let me make it plain that that has not been imposed on the armed forces; they have been working on this matter and have given it their full consideration, and they are at one with Ministers on that point—indeed, the recommendation came from the armed forces themselves. I am pleased to have been able to make that announcement today. It is appropriate in the context of the subject that we are discussing and hon. Members' interest in it.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I thank the Minister for his words today. This has been a moving time in the House. I thank him also for the tribute he paid to Ulstermen, especially those who fought at the battle of the Somme, after which there was hardly a home in the locality in which I work in which there were not victims. I thank him also for the way he put his remarks today; I want to assure him of that.

There is one note I want to strike—that it will appear strange to many people in Northern Ireland that the House can find a way to let terrorists out of prison by law, through a political act, whereas we cannot have a political pardon for the cases being discussed today. Why can there not be complete coverage, so that all can say that those men will rest in peace? I was touched when the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) spoke of the awesomeness of visiting the cemeteries, and by the Minister's words, echoing those of a victim: "What will my mother say?" I think that we will do good to everyone if we find a political way completely to lift the stigma through a pardon.

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. He has, for many years now, been a staunch supporter of the idea of the rule of law, and I believe that, when he thinks the matter through, he will not want me to dispense with the rule of law in coming to a political judgment. There is a clear distinction between the expression of regret and the sentiments that we have expressed today, and anything that has ever been expressed in respect of those convicted of terrorist offences. In addition, those men have not been pardoned in any way. The comparison is not a fair one; nor do I believe that it is one which the House would want to pursue, because it is not in accord with the sentiments expressed today.

I have no difficulty in reiterating, and joining the hon. Gentleman in acknowledging, the vast sacrifices made by the men of Ulster—it was men—during the first world war. The loyalty they showed to the United Kingdom throughout that period should not and will not be forgotten. I am sure that it is at the back of our minds as we deal with contemporary developments, and that it

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occasionally comes to the forefront of our minds when we consider the role of Ulster and the north of Ireland within the United Kingdom.

Mr. Bill Michie (Sheffield, Heeley): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. I share the view that none of us can understand the trauma that those soldiers experienced. I learned of that at second hand from my father when I was a child. He was in uniform throughout the war, and lost many of his comrades and two of his brothers. I am sure that, if he were alive today, he would be overjoyed by the statement. Will the Minister explain what communication will take place between his Department and the families concerned?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for his words. The number of families that have been in correspondence with me is relatively small—only 12—and I am writing to them today enclosing a copy of the review and my statement to the House. I shall express the hope that, by extending our feelings of regret, by asking that the names be added to war memorials and books of remembrance, by recognising that those men were, like many others, the victims of a terrible war, and by announcing the abolition of the death penalty, we have left to rest in peace the relatives about whom they feel so deeply, and lifted the stigma of execution.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): With considerable diffidence, I join other hon. Members in congratulating the Minister on his statement and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on raising the subject so forcefully over the past year or so. I use the word "diffidence", because, among hon. Members here this morning, only the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) has served in the second world war. He may be the only person who understands to some extent what the soldiers we are discussing went through in the first world war.

I thank the Minister for recognising the context in which the executions took place: 20,000 people were convicted of offences for which they could have been sentenced to death, but only a tiny proportion of them received the death penalty. I congratulate the Minister on recognising that the command structure were not the brutish, thoughtless, careless creature that so many people think it was.

I ask the Minister to bear in mind what others at the time may have thought, rather than what we now think at this distance. I think of my grandfathers, both of whom were decorated in the first world war and returned wounded, and one of whom was a founder of the Royal British Legion. I think also of my parents, one of whom has just, thanks to the Under-Secretary, received her war medals, and their contemporaries in the last war.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. and learned Gentleman must be brief.

Mr. Garnier: I shall be. Does not granting a pardon imply guilt of the offence for which someone is pardoned? Pardoning may therefore not be the answer that many people want. Will the legislation to remove the death penalty for military offences, to which the Minister referred, be a Government Bill and a discrete Bill dealing only with that measure, or a private Member's Bill for which the Government will give time?

Dr. Reid: I do not want to test your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. and learned Gentleman asked a list of questions, and I shall answer a couple of them.

I made known my views on the chain of command. Like the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), I have spoken to several veterans. There are different views among those who served in the first world war, and I have tried to place them in context today. Without punishment of some nature for desertion, many more people might have died because of the collapse of military discipline. That certainly happened in the forces of some of our allies which did not use the death penalty.

It would be normal to use the Armed Forces Bill to abolish the death penalty. As the hon. and learned Gentleman knows, that comes before the House every five years. That is when that provision will be incorporated into military law. It has not been used in peace for many years. We have said today that Defence Ministers will be inviting the House to decide that. As it is an issue of life and death, there will presumably be a free vote, although I cannot prejudge that. All Defence Ministers will certainly vote to abolish the death penalty, and will invite our colleagues to do so.

If legislation is required to sign protocol 6, which relates to the death penalty in peace or other than in war or the imminent threat of war, that will be introduced as an amendment to legislation that will introduced long before the Armed Forces Bill is introduced. That will allow us to ratify protocol 6.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

School Standards and Framework Act 1998

Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998

Northern Ireland Bill

Again considered in Committee.

Amendment proposed: No. 93, in clause 28, page 14, leave out lines 32 to 34.—[*Rev. Ian Paisley.*]

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

12.3 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): When we were interrupted by the important announcement that has just been made, I was dealing with this matter as it relates to the views of many people in Northern Ireland.

Hon. Members who do not know the constitution of the Irish Republic might like to know that there is a two-chamber system, made up of the Dail Eireann and the Senate. The Senate is a strange body, in that it is not purely elected. Many of its Members are nominated, and it is the prerogative of the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic to fill many of its seats.

It has always been the custom and political strategy of the various Governments—especially when Fianna Fail has been in power—to put prominent people from Northern Ireland into the Senate. Some Members of Parliament, including nationalist Members of Parliament and various other prominent republicans, have been put into the Senate. The Deputy First Minister designate of Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon), was nominated to the Irish Senate, but he was then elected to an Assembly in Northern Ireland and was removed from the Assembly because he had disqualified himself by accepting the nomination to the Irish Senate.

We had a very short debate on that subject when we debated the first Assembly Bill that came before the House. In fact, shortage of time prevented the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh from explaining the position in which he found himself and the resultant expense that he was put to. He has said that he is grateful that, if a similar thing happened again, he would not have that problem. Perhaps, therefore, the Deputy First Minister designate has his eye on sitting in the Senate as well. That would not help the situation in Northern Ireland. Ministers and others must choose whether they want to sit in the Assembly or in the House of Commons as part of the United Kingdom, or whether they want to be a Member of a Parliament of another state.

That leads me to the question, who will be eligible to stand for election to the Assembly? I notice that the Bill deals with that matter in such a way that those from the Irish Republic can stand for election to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I believe that those matters should not be in the Bill. It should be made plain to those who wish to take part in the Assembly that they should not be permitted to be Members of a Parliament of another state.

It would also be wrong for a Minister of the Assembly to sit in the Senate of another state. The two roles are incompatible; such a thing should not happen. The House should realise that. I do not believe that the House would tolerate it if a Minister of the House were a Member of another Parliament, even of another European Union country.

I wonder why the Bill allows such a thing to happen. I am sure that the Prime Minister—whoever it may be—in Dublin is just waiting for the opportunity to make use of the freedom that the Bill allows, because a Senate seat would be in the prerogative of the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic. The House should make it clear that people should give their loyalty to one place, not to two states.

Mr. McNamara: This might be called the Seamus Mallon clause—and perhaps it should be in honour of my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon). The important thing about the agreement and the feature that helps it to gel is the recognition of the legitimacy of both traditions within Northern Ireland. On constitutional issues, the agreement says that the parties will

"recognise the birthright of all people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland."

One wonders why the limitation applies only to the Senate of Northern Ireland and not also to its lower House. Any Irish citizen should be free to be elected to represent any area.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: May I finish my little story, and then I shall give way?

I am reminded of a similar situation when an Irish peer with a second subsidiary title came to Britain during the recent troubles and was stopped at the point of entry because he was holding an Irish passport. When asked what he was coming to this country to do, he replied, "To legislate for the likes of you". That may not have been the most polite reply, but it illustrates the free flow that has occurred between the various institutions and the elasticity of rules that apply everywhere in these islands except in the north of Ireland.

An Irish citizen may be elected to this place and to the Dail Eireann—there is no problem with that. Therefore, why should we not recognise and welcome the lifting of the partial ban because it embodies the spirit of the agreement? It also recognises the fact that, in the past, Irish and British men and women from both communities have been members of the Senate of the Irish Republic. For example, I refer hon. Members to the late Senator Gordon Wilson and Senator John Robb—people do not have to come from the nationalist community to serve in the Senate. We should welcome the fact that that generosity has existed and resent the tardiness that resulted in the problems faced by my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh. We should welcome the clause overwhelmingly.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I welcome very much the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), and I agree with every word he said. Although the entire Committee may not agree with him, I think that the vast majority of hon. Members do.

Clause 28(5) is a good provision and I hope that the Government will not give way on this point. As my hon. Friend said, it is a very useful clause. It also suits the philosophy of what we are endeavouring to achieve: a cross-community, co-operative view that recognises that

[Mr. Temple-Morris]

there is another side to the argument. It is in line also with the aims of the cross-border bodies to which I wish all health and strength.

Any loss of sovereignty is surely a matter for the Republic of Ireland. In response to the claim that its acceptance of people who are not technically its own is some sort of political strategy, all I can say is that people in the Republic of Ireland have been greatly reassured by that policy. My hon. Friend mentioned the late Senator Gordon Wilson, who was a great encouragement to the people of the Republic of Ireland in terms of their attitudes to Protestants in the north of Ireland. The policy was a triumph in encouraging everyone—including many hon. Members—who had anything to do with Ireland, north and south, to continue their efforts for peace when they were discouraged for various reasons. The measure is good for the Senate and for the Assembly.

We have an interesting example of the policy in action within this building. Ever since Irish independence, the House of Lords has contained a healthy number of Irish peers. There are a number of peers of Irish extraction, although of course they sit as United Kingdom peers. That is an excellent thing, and I am sure that members of the other place would agree. The old ones who remained after 1921 have all gone, but there are members of the House of Lords and those who aspire to membership of it who are resident in the Republic of Ireland now. The Earl of Mount Charles, whom some of us know, nearly ended up as Member of the Dail, when he could easily have been in the House of Lords were it not for his father's deserved longevity.

We are dealing with the understanding between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I shall speak to amendment No. 21, which is a probing amendment. It would delete subsection (7), which deals with the grounds for disqualifying a person from becoming a Member of the Assembly. The purpose of the amendment is to restrict membership of the Assembly to citizens of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the Commonwealth.

Given the importance of the concept of devolution to Northern Ireland, as well as to Scotland and Wales, and the need to transfer the democratic deficit to local political input, it seems strange that, under those devolution powers, we should not restrict membership of such an Assembly to people who belong to that community, thereby giving it maximum input.

Subsection (7) qualifies the disqualification rules set out in section 3 of the Act of Settlement by inserting a condition that that would be negated if a person were a citizen of the European Union. Can the Minister tell us whether the proposed measure is unique to Northern Ireland? It does not seem to be contained in the original House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 or the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975. It may have been added at a later date, subsequent to the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, following the Maastricht treaty.

It would be helpful if the Minister gave the Committee some clarification of the matter, and also justified the notion of citizenship of the European Union in relation to the laws of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Öpik: I am concerned that amendment No. 93 would tie Northern Irish politics too closely to the Irish Parliament. It raises the status of a political position in the Republic of Ireland to rather more than just a job.

When we look at Northern Ireland politics under the current circumstances and in the foreseeable future, we should not ascribe more than the status of a job such as engineer to the simple act of being a Member of the Senate. Although it can be assumed that a Senator has important responsibilities in the Republic of Ireland, those responsibilities do not extend to Northern Ireland. We would give unnecessary status to the position of Irish Senator if we decided that that was grounds for exclusion from membership of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) made some good points. It is up to Dublin to decide whether to have as Senators people who actively participate in Northern Ireland politics. It is up to us to decide whether we are happy with the individual's qualifications, but we should not go as far as deciding whether he is entitled to be a Member of the Assembly on the basis of what he does, if that is not directly related to the work of the United Kingdom Parliament or Northern Ireland politics. In that context, I think that the simplest approach is to regard eligibility to be a Member of the Dublin Parliament as unrelated to eligibility to be in the Northern Ireland Parliament. On that simple basis, I would be inclined not to agree to amendment No. 93. As for amendment No. 21, I, too, will be interested to hear the Minister's clarification of the issues that have been laid out.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Tony Worthington): The amendments seek to remove the exemption from disqualification, first, of Members of the Irish Senate and, secondly, of citizens of other European Union states. I associate myself closely with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris). He referred to the late Senator Gordon Wilson, and I remember going to the late Senator's funeral. I found it a moving experience to be there with representatives from both north and south. Those present were, I suppose, expressing their appreciation of what Senator Wilson's life had meant. They were saying that what happened at Eniskillen was totally unacceptable both north and south of the border. The invitation to him to be a Member of the Irish Senate was a powerful expression of such sentiments.

The House of Commons has considered these matters recently. It had the opportunity to discuss the issues during the passage of the Northern Ireland (Elections) Act 1998, which included identical provisions. It would be very much in conflict with that Act if we were to accept the amendment, which we shall not.

There have been many distinguished people from Northern Ireland who have sat in the Senate in the past. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley)

referred on several occasions to what he saw as a conflict of interest between a Minister being in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the Senate as well. However, the amendment is not about Ministers but about disqualification from membership of the Assembly.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Is the Minister saying that if someone got into the Assembly who was a Member of the Senate he would be blocked, if he became a Minister, from continuing in the Senate? Surely the way into the Government is by election to the Assembly. If that gets someone into the Assembly and he becomes a Minister, there is no blockage set out in the Bill to keep him from being a Member of the Senate.

Mr. Worthington: I am simply addressing the amendment. The part of the clause that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to remove is one which permits someone who is a Member of the Irish Senate being also a Member of the Assembly. I was addressing the hon. Gentleman's debating point. He was referring to Ministers, rather than people wishing to be candidates for the Assembly.

Amendment No. 21 stands in the name of the official Opposition. The part of the clause to which it relates is about its being all right for citizens of other European states to be candidates. Subsection (7) is identical to the provisions that were accepted by the House of Commons in agreeing to the passage of the Northern Ireland (Elections) Act 1998. As it happens, that is in line with the law in Scotland as well. I think that that is the answer to the point made by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss).

It is for the citizens of Northern Ireland to decide whether a particular citizen of another European Union state should represent them. We see no reason to exclude them. Accordingly, we would resist amendment No. 21 as well. The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire asked specifically about provisions elsewhere. The provisions in the Bill are the same in this respect as those of the Scotland Bill.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The way into office in the Northern Ireland Assembly is to get elected to the Assembly. A person can get elected to the Assembly and also be a Member of the Senate of the south of Ireland. There is nothing in the Bill to say that a Minister cannot be a Member of the Senate. Let us be clear. If he is a Member of the Assembly and is not disqualified, there is nothing in the Bill to say that he cannot continue to be a Member of the Senate, if that is his position. A Minister could, under the terms of the Bill, be a Member of the Senate.

On the subject of Dail Eireann, the person would have to be elected, and people in the south of Ireland do not look in too friendly a way on candidates from the north. The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) is popular in his constituency, but if he went across the border to Carlingford and stood for election to the Dail Eireann, I do not think that he would do well—even with all his great powers of oratory and influence.

Mr. McNamara: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rev. Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman did not give way to me, but I will be decent and give way to him in a minute, if he just holds on.

The hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) came out with the outrageous remark that Irish peers still sit in the other place. They do not sit there as Irish peers—they sit there because they possess an English peerage.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I said that.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman said that they were making a contribution to that House. That is the strangest thing—because someone originally had an Irish peerage, they can remain in that House. They are in that House because they are British peers. There are no Irish peers in the House of Lords. Talk about making bricks without straw—that is what the hon. Gentleman tried to do.

Mention was made of Gordon Wilson. He was not reached out to in the north to come down to the south. He was a southern man—he was brought up in the south. Let us get identities right. The Committee must get its facts right.

The Prime Minister of the south of Ireland can appoint various people to seats in the Senate. Under the Bill, he could now appoint the Deputy First Minister to a seat in the Senate. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) told us that this is probably the Mallon clause. I do not think that it should be in the Bill.

The Minister said that we have had time to discuss the matter. I refer him to *Hansard*, where he will see how much time we had. The debate came to an abrupt end when a vote was called.

Mr. McNamara: I am grateful for the graciousness and charm of the hon. Gentleman, and I am sorry that I did not reflect those virtues when he tried to intervene during my speech. First, the Irish peers sitting in the Lords with English titles were bribed with those English titles to get rid of the Irish Parliament in 1800 at the time of the Act of Union. That cost £24 million—a fair sum of money at the time. Secondly, I wish to make a more relevant point about people from the north being elected in the south. The President of the Republic of Ireland came from the north.

Rev. Ian Paisley: That might well be, but the President of the Republic is not a Member of Dail Eireann. I challenge members of the SDLP to fight seats in the south and see how they get on.

Mr. McNamara *rose—*

Rev. Ian Paisley: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again. I never asked how those peers got into the House of Lords or what money they paid for their English titles. If that was the way in which they got into the other place, shame on them. The hon. Member for Leominster said that they made a great contribution. What contribution could they make if they got in by paying £300 for their title?

12.30 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Does the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) want to withdraw his amendment?

Rev. Ian Paisley: No; we wish to shout no. *[Laughter.]*

The First Deputy Chairman: The hon. Gentleman wishes to shout no; I shall put the Question, then.

Rev. Ian Paisley: We wish to shout yes to the amendment, Mr. Martin.

The First Deputy Chairman: The Question is, That the amendment be made. As many as are of that opinion say "Aye".

Rev. Ian Paisley: Aye.

The First Deputy Chairman: To the contrary, "No".

Hon. Members: No.

The First Deputy Chairman: I think the Noes have it.

Amendment negatived.

Clause 28 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 29

EFFECT OF DISQUALIFICATION AND PROVISION FOR RELIEF

Mr. Moss: I beg to move amendment No. 22, in page 15, leave out lines 6 to 15.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 23, in clause 30, page 15, leave out lines 30 to 33.

Mr. Moss: Amendment No. 22 is a probing amendment. It would delete subsections (2) and (3) of clause 29, which provides relief for those who may be disqualified from the Assembly. Amendment No. 23 is consequential on amendment No. 22.

Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 outlines the circumstances in which a person is disqualified from Assembly membership. Disqualification is based solely on an individual holding particular office in, for example, the judiciary, the armed forces, the police, the civil service, quangos of one kind or another and non-departmental public bodies. Clause 29(2) gives the Assembly power to lay an order to direct that the original grounds for disqualifying a person can be waived in certain circumstances.

Even assuming that that is an acceptable power to give to the Assembly, the Bill is not clear whether the order to offer relief would need a simple majority vote in the Assembly or whether such a decision would require cross-community support. As the Bill does not specifically mention the latter, it is not unreasonable to conclude that that does not apply. Assembly decisions on individual cases could therefore be determined by the majority group of designated nationalists or designated Unionists. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the position.

Much has been made of the fact that the Bill must faithfully interpret and reflect the Belfast agreement, but there does not appear to be a corresponding section offering guidance in this context. Paragraph 25 of the strand 1 section refers to the removal of an individual from office, but not to removal from membership of the Assembly, disqualification from standing for election or even disqualification from being able to sit as a Member of the Assembly. Perhaps the Minister will offer some illumination. Will he confirm that this issue is not covered by a corresponding part of the Belfast agreement? If so, why was it deemed either necessary or expedient, and by whom, to incorporate powers of waiver for the Assembly?

Clause 29(2) is taken almost verbatim from section 6(2) and (3) of the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, which received Royal Assent on 8 May 1975—simultaneously with the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975. The Northern Ireland Act does not contain such a section, despite both Acts presumably passing through the House contemporaneously. Why was the difference deemed to be appropriate then, but not now? Do we really want to give the Assembly such a power, especially as it will be administered—if that is the right word—by order, through secondary legislation?

We need the Minister to explain a number of matters.

Mr. Worthington: These two amendments would remove the Assembly's power, in certain circumstances, to provide relief from disqualification. They would remove some flexibility. I note that the hon. Gentleman said that they were probing amendments. They apply to the fairly exotic circumstances in which people stand for election while disqualified and that is not made known before they get elected. That is unusual, and we believe that it is necessary to give the Assembly some flexibility. The election of such a candidate would be invalidated. People get annoyed—Winchester comes to mind—if they feel that their will has been thwarted through a technicality or for even more serious reasons.

This power allows the Assembly to set aside the disqualification. As the hon. Gentleman said, the disqualification is usually because the candidate holds a post or position that disqualifies him from being a representative in the Assembly. Candidates must put right the reason for which they were disqualified, so they would have to resign from their post. The cause of the disqualification would be removed, and the Assembly could set aside the disqualification if it so wished.

The hon. Gentleman said that a section of the community could vote, perhaps on a sectarian basis, for someone to be disqualified. Other Members of the Assembly would be free to challenge any such move, and the petition of concern is a further safeguard. If 30 Members of the Assembly feel that decisions should be made on a cross-party basis, they can cause that to occur. I think that that deals with the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman.

The provisions reflect those that applied to the previous Assembly in Northern Ireland; which apply to the House of Commons; and which are in the Scotland Bill. I hope that I have answered the hon. Gentleman's points.

Mr. Moss: I am grateful for the Minister's response. Can a candidate who is deemed to be disqualified, for whatever reason, from taking his place in the Assembly appeal against that disqualification under existing law? Why does it require the Assembly to lay an order? That allows the Assembly to decide whether the disqualification should be waived.

The Minister said that a similar measure applies to the House of Commons. As I said, it is contained in section 6 of the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975. Going through the House at the same time was the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975, but this measure was not in that legislation. Do I understand from his final remarks that he is now saying that the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 has been amended to bring it into line with the measures applying to the House of Commons?

Mr. Worthington: I regret that I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman's last point immediately. He raised the issue of an appeal against disqualification. Again, it is difficult to give an instant answer without knowing the grounds on which an appeal was being made. A person is disqualified from standing for the Assembly if he holds a particular position. That is usually a cut and dried case—either one holds a position or one does not. Obviously, there would be an appeal—to use the word loosely—within the Assembly by the Assembly Member concerned or his or her representatives when the Assembly could hear the case.

We are talking here about the Assembly's ability to set aside the disqualification if the grounds for disqualification have already been resolved. It would be against the law for a person to continue to hold a specified post and become a Member of the Assembly. Although it would be grounds for disqualification for a person to stand for election to the Assembly while holding such a post, if he or she had given up the post, the Assembly would have the power to set aside the disqualification that had previously applied. The hon. Gentleman may wish to enlighten me later, but it is difficult to think of other grounds for an appeal. There could not be an appeal in respect of the merits of holding the post. That is simply the law of the United Kingdom Parliament.

I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman. It seems fairly obvious that the Assembly requires some flexibility, as the consequences of setting aside the results of an election on what may be a technicality or a post-holding issue that has been resolved by resignation are too serious to leave the Assembly without the power to set aside that disqualification.

Mr. Moss: I am grateful to the Minister. When I spoke about an appeal, I was asking about an appeal by a person who has been disqualified in clause 29(2)(a) who feels

"that the grounds of disqualification or alleged disqualification which subsisted or arose at the material time have been removed".

I wondered whether that would be possible without necessarily giving the Assembly the power to do that by order.

The Minister said that he would write to me or speak to me at a later date, but I am still puzzled why, if the provision is already incorporated in Northern Ireland statute, I could not find it in the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975. It may have been added later, in which case it has simply been brought across and presumably will fall from the earlier legislation. I am quite happy to accept the Minister's statement that it already applies to Northern Ireland and, on that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 29 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 30 and 31 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 32

COMMISSION

Mr. McGrady: I beg to move amendment No. 187, in clause 32, page 16, line 37, at end insert—

'Such directions shall not be given without cross-community support.'.

Clause 32 deals with the Commission, which is akin to the shadow business committee that currently exists to deal with the day-to-day requirements of the shadow Assembly. Subsections (1) to (4) have been substantively dealt with by the creation of the shadow committee, of which the Commission will be the successor. The committee was created under the requirement of cross-community support, and my amendment to subsection (5) would mean that special directions or requirements given by the Assembly to the Commission in connection with its functions would also require cross-community support. It may be argued that the amendment should apply to all of clause 32. If so, I should be happy to hear the Minister accept it in those terms.

12.45 pm

Mr. Temple-Morris: I support the amendment. The Assembly will give directions to the Commission, which will be the body on high for the whole operation. Most of clause 32 has to do with membership of the Commission, which is covered by other parts of the Bill. Subsection (5) is distinct in providing that

"The Assembly may give special or general directions to the Commission for the purpose of or in connection with the exercise of the Commission's functions."

That goes very wide, and the Commission's role may be altered by it. There is a clear case for adding the safeguard suggested by the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady), which is provided in the rest of the Bill.

Mr. Öpik: Am I to understand that the hon. Gentleman judges the amendment to be a safety measure?

Mr. Temple-Morris: It is, and that is the spirit in which the hon. Member for South Down moved it.

Mr. Worthington: The amendment deals with the Commission that will provide the property, staff and services of the Assembly. Clause 32(5) empowers the Assembly to give special or general directions to the Commission in relation to its functions. I appreciate the spirit of the amendment supported by the hon.

[Mr. Worthington]

Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris). The Commission will be the servant of the Assembly, and should carry out its functions dispassionately.

However, the Bill already contains safeguards. A motion to give directions to the Commission could, for example, be subject to the petition of concern procedure, which would require a cross-community vote. Equally, the Assembly Standing Orders could ensure that there was cross-community support: we assume that the Standing Orders under clause 32(2) on the appointment of members of the Commission itself ensure that members are representative of the Assembly as a whole.

There could be ambiguity about the amendment. My hon. Friend the Member for Leominster referred to the mystical ways in which this place is run. I have never troubled myself with that, but one sees that it runs in a fair way. No doubt, directions are given all the time; one would not want to come to the House so that they could be given all-party support. It is necessary to delegate at times, but I believe that the safeguard is there in the petition of concern. The safeguard will be there in the terms of the membership of the commission.

Mr. McGrady: I hear what the Under-Secretary says regarding the various safeguards applying to many aspects of the running of the Assembly and the business committee, or, as it is called in the Bill, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, but clause 32(5) gives the Assembly statutory authority to give any

"special or general directions to the Commission"

without cross-community support. As a layman, that is my interpretation of what clause 32(5) does. I urge him to give this matter further consideration, if necessary. The normal mechanisms that he has described, which apply to other aspects of the clause and other aspects of the management of the Assembly per se, have the same criteria for support—that is, cross-community support—that we had anticipated.

Mr. Worthington: If the Assembly looks like it is going to give, in a biased, partial way, special or general directions, that would, I assume from the Bill, have to come to the floor of the Assembly. It will then be open for people who object to the way in which the Commission is developing to have a petition of concern, and for 30 Members to say, "This should be on a cross-community basis." Therefore, what the hon. Gentleman seeks is there for the safeguarding of his Members or other Members.

I fear that if one said that everything that the Commission had to do in managing matters had to be on a cross-community basis, there would be an element of paralysis about it, but, if, at any time, Members were concerned about the way in which the Commission was developing, there are safeguards in the Standing Orders, in the membership of the Commission and through the petition of concern mechanism, to ensure that things are done through cross-community support.

We are listening to the whole debate. If there are any grounds for us to think that the safeguards in the Bill are inadequate—at the moment, I think that they are adequate—we shall contact the hon. Gentleman, or, if he wants to flesh out what he is saying about his concerns, we shall look at the matter again. However, at the moment, I feel that what he wants is within the framework of the Bill and I ask him to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. McGrady: In view of the Under-Secretary's last remarks and his very generous offer of reconsideration and, indeed, communication on the matter, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 32 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 6 agreed to.

Clause 33 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 7 agreed to.

Clause 34 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 35

MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Mr. Moss: I beg to move amendment No. 24, in page 17, leave out lines 32 to 36.

Clause 35 deals with Members' interests. The amendment would delete subsection (3), which deals with the power of the Assembly to establish Standing Orders that may prevent or restrict the participation of a Member with a registerable interest in a matter to which the Assembly's proceedings relate.

Will the Minister enlighten the Committee on to where the proposal in subsection (3) emanates from? It has certainly been incorporated in the Scotland Bill, which recently proceeded through the House, but I could not find an earlier reference in relation to Standing Orders for this Parliament.

The rules of this House have certainly been tightened in the year or so since the Nolan report, but, so I am led to understand by the Clerks of the House, we have nothing that goes so far as to prevent a Member from participating in our proceedings, save that a Member is not allowed to act as an advocate for a person or body for which he or she has a registerable interest.

Subsection (3) gives the Assembly wide-ranging powers to impose severe and possibly unacceptable conditions on its Members that could inhibit debate. Significant contributions can often be made by Members with expertise and a particular interest, registerable or otherwise, in a particular subject. So long as that interest is registered and declared at the appropriate time in the Assembly's proceedings, there is nothing to be lost, and much to be gained, by exercising tolerance and reasonableness.

Given the various other constraints placed on the operation of the Assembly, essentially through the separation of excepted and reserved matters from transferred matters, why should the Assembly be given powers that would work against the interests of openness and democracy in its proceedings? The amendment would remove the particular power from the Assembly to make such Standing Orders. In our submission, it would leave, in the remaining subsections of clause 35, considerable opportunities for the Assembly to make Standing Orders to regulate the participation of Members with a registerable interest. For example, subsection (4) deals

adequately with advocacy and the payment for initiating a cause in the Assembly, which are quite rightly to be prohibited.

Subsection (3) is superfluous to requirements. It is not to be found in the agreement. The amendment would help the proper and effective working of the Assembly by not placing unreasonable restrictions on the free speech afforded to its Members. That is a sentiment which I hope the Minister and the Government will find persuasive.

Mr. Öpik: I support the amendment, as the provision not only seems over-cautious but runs the risk of being manipulated in rather dubious ways.

I might be oversimplifying matters a little, but if one considers the operation of this Chamber, the fact is that, so long as an hon. Member declares an interest, he can participate meaningfully in a debate. Surely someone who declares an interest is more likely to want to participate in relevant debates, not always—or not usually—with evil intent. Moreover, if someone has declared an interest, is not he or she more likely to give an informed opinion and to know something about that issue?

I should much prefer to have a debate with people who have openly declared an interest and said why they wish to participate in a debate than with those who—although they may perhaps be able to be entirely dispassionate about it—may not have the matter at heart. Therefore, I look forward to hearing the Minister's reassurances about why clause 34(3) has been included in the Bill.

1 pm

Mr. Worthington: We think that amendment No. 24 is a strange amendment, as it would remove the Assembly's power to provide in its Standing Orders for

"preventing or restricting the participation in proceedings of . . . a member with a registerable interest . . . in a matter to which the proceedings relate."

The subsection is not telling the Assembly; it is giving it the power to include such a provision in its standing orders if it wishes to do so.

Clause 35(3) has to be read in conjunction with 35(2), which requires people to make a declaration of interest. That requirement is clear cut. However, clause 35(3) provides that the Assembly may—not "shall", which is always a point of confusion in legislation—take the power to decide that it is not sufficient for a Member simply to declare an interest, but that, in some particular instances, there should be extra powers to restrict a Member's participation.

There is nothing unusual about such a provision. As someone who moved from UK local government to UK central Government, I thought that it was very strange that all that was necessary to carry on speaking in this place was to declare an interest, whereas in local government one would not be allowed to speak in a debate or to be part of a committee that was considering a matter in which one had a declared interest. One would not be allowed even to be in the room when a decision was made on the matter.

We think that, in the majority of cases, it will be sufficient simply to require Members to declare an interest. However, in other cases, it may be appropriate for a Member to be prevented from voting on a matter in which he or she has a close interest. Although I do not want to deal with too many speculative issues, one might wish, for example, to give to the Assembly the power to introduce Standing Orders that, in some circumstances, would prevent a Member voting on an issue in which he or she has a significant financial interest—just as happens in local government.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): As my hon. Friend said, is not "may" the operative word and the essential point? In most cases, a financial interest will be registered if there is one, and there will be no prohibition on a person speaking. However, if an interest, for example a contract, is so blatant or commercial, such a safeguard is reasonable and wise—especially in the post-Nolan world, and bearing in mind my hon. Friend's comments on local government—but is likely to be used only very rarely.

Mr. Worthington: I am grateful for that intervention, which very much made the point that I wanted to make. We are saying not that such a provision has to be made, but that it will be for the judgment of the Assembly to decide the matter in formulating its Standing Orders. It can include the provision in its Standing Orders if it so wishes. We believe that it must be right to enable the Assembly to restrict or prevent in certain circumstances the participation of Members from proceedings in which they may have an interest. We think that that will add very considerably to the Assembly's credibility and openness.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): May I draw the Minister's attention to the largest industry in Northern Ireland, agriculture? A number of Members of the Assembly have agricultural interests, which are naturally financial interests. If they—the representatives of that section of the Northern Ireland community—were prevented from participating, the result might be extremely skewed decisions, because those decisions would have been taken by people who did not have a financial interest. It is for that reason that I tend to agree with the amendment rather than with the Minister.

Mr. Worthington: My point is that we should give the Assembly the power to exercise its own good sense in respect of its Standing Orders relating to what is an interest, the level of interest that should be declared and what action is to be taken. I have no problem whatsoever with the proposition that those involved in agriculture should defend the interests of agriculture; their expertise is perfectly acceptable and should be used by the Assembly. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman recognises that it would be quite inappropriate for someone who would personally benefit financially from a decision of the Assembly—someone whose farm would benefit specifically—to be required only to declare an interest. The Assembly might regard that as an inadequate disqualification of a person from participation in making decisions on that matter.

The matter is for the Assembly to decide in its Standing Orders relating to the declaration of interests and the role to be played by special interests within the Assembly. We should give the Assembly the power to draw up Standing Orders that enhance the standing of the Assembly in the

[Mr. Worthington]

eyes of the people of Northern Ireland. That is why we are giving the Assembly that power, which is a sensible power.

Mr. Moss: The Minister still has not answered the question that I put to him. Where does the clause come from? He has not told the Committee whether it appears in legislation pertaining to the proceedings of the House. He referred to local authority standing orders, so the provision might well have been lifted from local government legislation.

Notwithstanding the support that we would give to proper constraints relating to Members' interests in the operation of the Assembly, as I have said, we believe that there are adequate safeguards in clause 35. I agree with the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) that there should be proper safeguards. The clause uses the word "may", but we would conclude that there are sufficient safeguards already in clause 35. For example, subsection (4) states:

"Standing orders shall"

—not may—

"include provision prohibiting a member of the Assembly from . . . advocating or initiating any cause or matter on behalf of any person",

or, indeed, on behalf of his or herself, no doubt,

"by any means specified in standing orders, in consideration of any payment or benefit in kind".

I should have thought that that was a catch-all provision and that subsection (3) was therefore pretty irrelevant.

Mr. Worthington: On the question of where the provision comes from, the situation has been evolving since Nolan, so I cannot say that it is a straight copy from any specific legislation relating to the House. We are making proposals that seem appropriate to the new post-Nolan position. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the matter is not covered in the agreement, but we could not, in those miraculous few days, expect the agreement to cover all such issues.

However, I am sure that it is obvious to everyone that there should be a provision in the Northern Ireland Bill that sets up the Assembly covering the matter of Members' interests. We have simply put forward the proposition that, in the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, there should be a discretionary power for the Standing Orders of the Assembly to allow a ruling to be made as to whether, in some circumstances, the body needs to go beyond what exists in other respects. I am told that the provisions in the Scotland Bill are the same, almost word for word, and give flexibility to the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Winnick: I do not want to be controversial at this time of the afternoon. I am not suggesting that my hon. Friend agrees with me, but it would not be a bad idea if we introduced the same Standing Orders in the House of Commons.

Mr. Worthington: It is interesting to hear what is in my hon. Friend's mind at this time on a Friday afternoon.

The provision is sensible and it will be up to the good sense of the Assembly to decide how to use it, if it wishes to do so.

Mr. Moss: Obviously, there must be adequate safeguards in the Assembly to deal with Members' interests. No one is suggesting that that should not be the case, but this may be a safeguard too far. We are in danger of over-legislating, and there are plenty of other adequate provisions in clause 35 to deal with Members with registrable interests.

It is interesting to hear the Minister admit that it is all right to add to the agreement, but not to detract from it. The Bill makes many additions to the agreement, which was presumably cast in tablets of stone on Mount Sinai.

As this point may be revisited in another place, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 35 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 36 to 44 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 45

PAYMENTS INTO THE FUND: TAXES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received representations about clause 45, including representations from the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), that there needs to be consistency between Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland on these matters. Although I recommend that the Committee supports the clause, we may return to this matter on Report.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 45 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 46

PAYMENTS INTO THE FUND: SECRETARY OF STATE

Mr. Moss: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in clause 46, page 23, line 20, at end add—

'( ) Subject to subsection ( ) below, the Secretary of State shall make such a payment at least once every financial year.

( ) No such payment shall be made unless the Secretary of State has laid before the House of Commons a statement certifying that the payment recognises the needs of Northern Ireland in relation to the needs of the United Kingdom as a whole.'.

I welcome the Minister of State's remarks about clause 45. Clauses 45 and 46 are as important as many others in the Bill. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom to have its own Consolidated Fund, although clause 61 of the Scotland Bill will set up such a fund for Scotland. The Province has always been subject to the same taxes as the rest of the country, which are collected by UK Departments. Its share of those taxes and any other revenue collected in Northern Ireland is paid into its Consolidated Fund. Parliament then adds a further amount—the so-called subvention—to that fund each year. That consists, first, of an automatic increase, calculated under the Barnett formula and, secondly, of an additional payment negotiated in each year's spending round.

Under the Barnett formula, any change in spending in Great Britain is also applied to Northern Ireland, but scaled down to reflect the Province's smaller population. That means that if spending on relevant Great Britain

programmes is raised or cut by £100 million, funding for Northern Ireland increases or decreases by about £2.91 million.

That figure is now adjusted annually to take account of population changes. I believe that the figure for last year was £2.87 million. The Minister, who is responsible for finance, will no doubt confirm that. The Barnett formula determines only the annual change in funding for Northern Ireland, not the baseline figure. Moreover, as the change is based on levels of expenditure in Great Britain, it does not even work to maintain higher per capita spending in the Province. Indeed, if an increasing amount of the Province's funding is based on the lower level of spending in Great Britain, the gap narrows.

1.15 pm

That has not happened in practice because, for some time, every Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has always secured an additional payment for the Province. However, it may be more difficult for Secretaries of State to do so after devolution, because the Bill says only that

"The Secretary of State may from time to time make payments into the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland out of money provided by Parliament."

Amendment No. 26 would add the following:

"Subject to subsection ( ) below, the Secretary of State shall make such a payment at least once every financial year."

The Scotland Bill and the Government of Wales Bill say "shall"—not "may", the word used in the Bill before us. The second part of our amendment reads:

"No such payment shall be made unless the Secretary of State has laid before the House of Commons a statement certifying that the payment recognises the needs of Northern Ireland in relation to the needs of the United Kingdom as a whole."

In short, we believe that the amendment guarantees that the Province will continue to get the funding that it needs, based on an accurate assessment of those needs in relation to spending in the United Kingdom as a whole.

No Minister in Northern Ireland, and I expect no Ministers of the Assembly, as and when it starts to do its work, would want a situation to arise where the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland are left waiting for the crumbs from the Treasury table, unable to question whether the money paid into that Consolidated Fund, plus any extra moneys, is related specifically to the unique needs of Northern Ireland, which have been recognised by every Government and Secretary of State since direct rule.

Mr. Paul Murphy: The amendment suggests that money to supplement the Consolidated Fund in Northern Ireland may be given without proper consideration to the balance of public expenditure throughout the United Kingdom. That is not the case; it is given on the same basis as money in any other part of the country. It is unusual only in being identified in statute. In Scotland, by comparison, there is no division into attributable and non-attributable payments. The Northern Ireland subvention is properly authorised annually by Parliament in the United Kingdom, in a process which, of course, takes account of the financial requirements of all parts of the United Kingdom.

The changes proposed are unnecessary. The existing funding mechanism enables the comparison to be made—which the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) mentioned—between the needs of Northern Ireland and those of the United Kingdom as a whole. I believe that it reflects population and needs, as in the case of the other regions and countries of the UK, and I do not believe that we should single out Northern Ireland in the way that the amendment proposes.

As I said earlier, there is force in the argument that the arrangements in clause 45 for attributing a share of taxation to Northern Ireland are wrong. That is why I spoke briefly a moment ago. It is only right that we should be concerned about the way in which Northern Ireland is funded—the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that—and that the needs of the entire United Kingdom are taken into account. I think that the allocation is fair; it has been with us a long time and the arrangements will be similar under devolution. The measure has operated for many years, including when the hon. Gentleman was a Northern Ireland Minister. I do not think that it would be right to go further than that, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Moss: I thank the Minister for that response. However, two questions remain unanswered. First, why does the clause say that the Secretary of State "may" when the word "shall" is used in the Scotland Bill and the Government of Wales Bill? Can the Minister explain why Northern Ireland is different? We should certainly firm up the wording to incorporate the word "shall" instead of the word "may". That would give a little more comfort to future Members of the Assembly and to Ministers who will take over in Northern Ireland.

I am reassured by the Minister's comments that he believes that the future distribution of moneys to Northern Ireland will be fair and will take account of Northern Ireland's unique needs. Nowhere else in the United Kingdom has the pressure of law and order and terrorism on its budget. I hope that that is a thing of the past, but nothing on the horizon suggests that expenditure in that area will diminish in the short term.

Perhaps the issue will be revisited in another place, but I think that we should give Assembly Members and the ministerial team further assurances that Northern Ireland's unique needs will not be left to the whim of a Secretary of State but be set down in statute. That would give them the firm reassurance that I am sure that they seek. On the basis of the Minister's response, I shall seek leave to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Murphy: I realise that the hon. Gentleman intends to withdraw the amendment, but he may be interested in my response to his two questions. First, he referred to the use of the word "may" in the clause. That matter will be considered as a consequence of our re-examination of clause 45. As he knows, the issues to which he referred are transferred matters and do not include the law and order budget. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for agreeing to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Moss: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 46 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 47 to 49 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 50

FINANCIAL ACTS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Moss: I beg to move amendment No. 28, page 24, line 38, at end insert 'or'.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 29, in page 24, line 39, leave out from 'Crown' to end of line 40 and insert—

'(2A) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act and any Order in Council made under the provisions of this Act, the Assembly shall neither impose nor vary taxes.'.

No. 30, in page 24, line 43, leave out from 'appropriated' to end of line 1 on page 25.

Mr. Moss: Clause 50 deals with the Assembly's financial powers. Tax-raising powers in general are defined as excepted matters and are to be found in paragraph 9 of schedule 2 to the Bill. They include taxes levied across the entire United Kingdom and any existing taxes in Northern Ireland. The list includes inheritance tax, stamp duty, general betting duty, pool betting duty, duty on gaming machine licences and duty on vehicle licences. From a reading of clause 50(1), which states:

"in pursuance of a recommendation which . . . is made by the Minister of Finance and Personnel; and . . . is signified to the Assembly by him or on his behalf",

it would seem that the Assembly could pass a vote

"which imposes or increases a tax".

That is in subsection (2)(d). In addition, under subsection (3), powers are given to the Assembly to impose or increase a tax, as long as there is cross-community support. It is not clear from the Bill, however, which tax or taxes that applies to—presumably, any taxes outside the list that I enumerated.

Those tax-raising powers seem to be new powers given to the Assembly, but the Minister may correct me. I found identical provisions in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, in terms of the definition of taxes under excepted matters. Where do tax-raising powers appear in the Belfast agreement? I could not find them. No doubt, this is one of the necessary additions to that agreement about which we spoke earlier.

Our amendments would remove the powers of the Assembly to raise taxes. Even if the power remains on the statute, it is vital that the taxes referred to in the Bill are clearly and unequivocally defined.

Mr. Öpik: The issue arose in regard to Wales. One of our biggest objections to the plans for the Welsh Assembly was it would not have tax-varying powers. I should be delighted if the Northern Ireland Assembly were given tax-varying powers, not least because, if there were cross-community support for varying a tax, that would imply that there was good reason to do so, but most of all because the most powerful indication of an autonomous decision-making Assembly is its ability to vary tax. That is one of the best aspects of the Scottish proposals, and one of the deficiencies in the Welsh ones.

I look forward to the Minister's comments. I cannot support the Conservative amendment on this occasion.

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have much sympathy with the point raised by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) about the misleading nature of the clause. I understand that, for various technical and legal reasons, it would be difficult to amend the clause. However, it must be read in conjunction with schedule 2, which makes it clear that the clause does not refer to general tax-raising powers, about which the hon. Gentleman was troubled.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) spoke about tax-varying powers. Those were not part of the agreement and were not finalised. I have subsequently consulted parties in Northern Ireland, who are generally of the view that there should not be such powers.

The clause refers to the regional rate in Northern Ireland, which was set up by the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973 and which is used to discharge many functions in Northern Ireland that are normally discharged by local authorities in England and Wales. The Assembly will retain the right to raise the regional rate, but there are no plans in the Bill for a general tax-levying, tax-raising or tax-varying power. Consequently, I ask the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Moss: Perhaps the Minister and his civil service draftsmen will look again at the wording of the Bill. It might be helpful to define the tax as the general rate. That would overcome the problem quite easily. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 50 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 51 to 53 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Committee report progress; to sit again on Monday next.

ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Friday 31st July, do adjourn till Monday 19th October.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Friday 31st July, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until she shall have notified the Royal Assent to Acts agreed upon by both Houses.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Night Flights (Windsor)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

1.29 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): The House will know from earlier debates my concern that Heathrow, while being a great asset to the country as a whole and to the south-east in particular, should be a good and responsible neighbour to those communities that surround it. Both west London and east Berkshire suffer greatly from the airport's environmental pollution, especially in terms of noise. The Government are consulting on the matter, and that exercise will take a significant move forward while the House is in recess.

I am very grateful to be able to raise my concerns before the House rises, and before one proposal in particular develops momentum and we are told that we had left it too late to object. The particular proposal is that there might be a change in runway preferential use at night. I shall return to that later.

My speech may seem complex, but it is necessarily so. It is not an emotional public relations exercise, but an attempt to convince the Minister and the House that we in Windsor face increased hazards to our health and well-being. First, however, I need to make a series of general but connected points.

The Minister for Transport in London will know that I have long advocated a total ban on night flights at Heathrow, and that remains my position. My constituents—indeed, all those who live around the airport—are entitled to a good night's sleep untroubled by the planes thundering in overhead. Other countries and other airports simply do not allow their people to be subjected to such abuse. It is a matter of priorities, and mine is the people in my constituency. The Government's priority should be the people who live all round the area, and not the carriers and the minuscule number of passengers who land at night.

This afternoon, I want to address what can and should be done in the period, which I hope will be brief, before the Government become persuaded of a total ban on night flights. First, the Government need to be absolutely clear that the main problem nowadays with Heathrow, for the great majority of those troubled by aircraft noise, comes from landings, not from take-offs. This in some measure reflects past successes in curbing take-off noise, and that should be recognised. However, I still find people, even those who are closely associated with the airport, who do not realise that the debate has moved on. Nowadays, landings are the big problem, especially for Windsor and the surrounding area.

Secondly, there is much misunderstanding about the effects of the process of runway alternation at Heathrow. That is also important from Windsor's point of view. I know that the Minister understands how these things work very well, but, for the benefit of those who may not, I should explain that, at any given moment, planes take off and land in the same direction. The direction of plane movement is determined by the direction of the wind. Planes both take off and land into the wind.

Heathrow has two main runways, so when planes are taking off to the west on, say, the southern runway, they land to the west on the northern runway. At regular intervals, while the movement of planes remains to the west, landings switch from one runway to the other, so that planes take off on the northern runway and land on the southern. This affords the residents of west London relief from the noise of landing aircraft. I am pleased for them that they get this relief.

However, the same is not true when the movement of flights is towards the east. That is because of the so-called "Cranford agreement," which means that planes cannot take off on the northern runway towards the east—over Cranford.

When I last brought this matter to the attention of the House, I was able to demonstrate that there is in fact no such agreement. The Minister at the time was Steven Norris, and he had notice that I was going to raise the matter. His officials no doubt searched the former Department of Transport from the attic to the basement, and no agreement was found. The Minister told the House that there was no such agreement.

Before the debate, I alerted the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Mr. Keen)—who represents Cranford—that I would mention the matter again today. Now is not the time to go into it in great detail, but I hope to return to the arrangement—which I take to be a political fix from the past—at some later time.

The so-called Cranford agreement means that, as planes cannot take off on the northern runway towards the east, they have to use the southern runway all the time. That in turn means that all planes landing from the west have to land on the northern runway, the approach to which lines up precisely over Windsor. When aircraft movement is to the east, the planes come in low and noisy over Windsor, Datchett, Horton and other communities in my constituency and others.

Once we have understood that, we can dispel the misunderstanding that east Berkshire somehow has it easy because fewer planes land from the west than land from over London. Roughly 30 per cent. of daytime arrivals come in over Windsor, with 70 per cent. landing over west London. However, because there is no runway alternation, when the planes are landing to the east, the whole 30 per cent. of the landings take place over Windsor. When the wind changes direction and the plans land from over London, no one area is affected for the full 70 per cent. of the time.

Due to alternation, two communities in west London are affected roughly 35 per cent. of the time each. The difference between landing from the east and west is not really 70:30 per cent. If one thinks of the three communities involved—two on one side of the airport and on one the other—the difference is really 35:35:30 per cent. Far from being the lucky partner, Windsor's position is closely comparable to that of the two areas in west London also affected by landing noise.

I come to my third point. I have told the House before that Windsor has done badly from the modern electronic landing system at Heathrow, which now brings in planes with monotonous precision right over our heads—although I recognise that there is a safety gain. I also recognise that, in general, marginal improvements are made year on year in reducing aircraft noise. Those of us who follow these matters closely are grateful for that—even for minor incremental improvements. However, such benefits as may have come to Windsor in the past 10 years have been more than offset by the modern inflexible landing system which I have described.

[Mr. Michael Trend]

The fourth point is that we in east Berkshire know without looking out of the window or at a weather vane when we are in for it—by that, I mean when the plans will come crashing in over our heads. In summer and winter, the same weather system that, happily, drives us out of doors infuriatingly drives the planes right over our heads. The west winds bring clouds and rain, but when the wind is in the east, the weather is usually fine and clear. On hot summer evenings—when people like to sit in their gardens or sleep with their windows wide open—and on those marvellous, clear, crisp winter days when people wish to get out of their houses and enjoy a respite from the winter gloom, we in east Berkshire get the full landing treatment, thanks to Heathrow.

I hope that I have shown that the problems created by aircraft landing over east Berkshire are severe, and deserve to be better understood and recognised. That brings me to the pressing matter of runway preferential use at night. As part of their consultation exercise, the Government put forward the idea that current runway preferential use could be reconsidered. British Airways recently put out a press release, stating that there

"should be a review of runway preferential use at night"

and that that

"should test the benefits and feasibility of a switch to 'easterly preference'."

I find such a proposal completely unacceptable.

I hope that the Government will not be influenced by BA, or by others, to consider a change in preferences. Windsor is not the lucky partner in daytime landing—it experiences roughly the same misery from landing noise as any other community. That has become worse due to the modern technology used for landings, and it is always bad when the weather is at its best.

Windsor's position would become substantially worse if night preferences were changed. The percentages of flights landing from the east and west at night differ from the daytime figures, largely because of a natural difference in ambient wind levels. Recent figures from the Department show that, between 4 am and 6 am, there is a five-knot westerly preference, which means that the split is roughly 85 per cent. of flights landing over London and 15 per cent. over Windsor. Thankfully, that is better than the daytime figures.

The Government, however, are considering options on having no preference or a five-knot easterly preference for those hours. If the no-preference option came in, my constituents would be subjected to an increase from 15 to 40 per cent. of all night flights. With a five-knot easterly preference, the current 15 per cent. would increase to 80 per cent. or more.

We are told that only 16 flights are permitted to land between 4 am and 6 am, but I fear that the figure is often higher. The Minister will understand that I am using a rough and ready calculus, but, accepting the figure of 15 per cent. for the moment, under the present arrangement, two and a half planes-worth would land over Windsor in those two hours, when we should all be asleep. That would go up to six and a half planes-worth if there was no preference, or to 13 planes a night under the easterly preference. The Minister should think about what that would mean for my constituents.

I cannot vouch for the figures being absolutely precise, but hon. Members should imagine what it would be like if my constituents were woken roughly half a dozen or a dozen times a night instead of twice. It would be monstrous. The present position does not suit anyone around Heathrow, but there is a rough balance of misery between west London and east Berkshire.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that night flights do not affect only the people in his area, but are a huge issue in other parts of London, especially south and south-west London, where large public meetings have been held about this problem? Unless there is real danger, flights should not be allowed to land during the night.

Mr. Trend: I agree entirely—I favour a total ban on night flights. There is a balance of misery between people on my side and the hon. Lady's side of the airport, and both constituencies experience noise problems because we are so close to it, but it would be dangerous and difficult for my constituents if the balance were upset. A switch in night flight preferences would throw the balance out most appallingly; even a rise to 40 per cent. of night flights would bring uproar from the people of Windsor, and I would happily lead them.

Many other communities on our side of the airport would also be affected. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) has asked me to associate her with the views that I am expressing. I know how concerned she is for the interests of her constituents who are affected by aircraft noise. I have also been asked to register the great concern of the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), and willingly do so. She has told me that any change in night landing preferences would be utterly unacceptable.

I spent some time in the Department, at a more modest level than the Minister, as a parliamentary private secretary at the old Department of Transport. One lesson I learned was that the Government get no credit for improving noise conditions, whether in the air or on the roads. But when noise gets worse, the Government get it in the neck. If the noise gets substantially worse in east Berkshire as a result of any change in preferences, the Minister will have a serious problem on her hands.

The balance of misery is a delicate one. There is nothing to be gained from destroying it, but much to lose. I accept that the airport works hard to improve conditions generally around Heathrow, and the Government can claim that there has been progressive improvement without creating such a dramatic disturbance as would follow a change in night preferences.

The MPs of east Berkshire do not want a change in preference. Our constituents would not tolerate it. Neither do we want to have the no-preference option and then be told that we were lucky not to have had easterly preferences imposed on us. The present position is bad enough, and I implore the Minister not to make it worse. To change night preferences would be unreasonable and unjust.

1.45 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) on securing the debate, and on the persistence

and dedication that he has brought to this topic over the many years that he has given such doughty service to the House and to his constituents. I thank him for his generosity in allowing an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), and for assuring the House that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) and the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) share his concerns, not least on the issue of runway preferential use and its alteration.

The issue is noise disturbance suffered not only by the constituents of the hon. Member for Windsor, but by the many thousands, possibly millions, of people who live in and around London, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall said.

As the House will be aware, a preliminary consultation paper on night restrictions on aircraft movements at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted was issued on 27 February. That consultation invited views on all aspects of the present regime, and closed on 29 May. We are now considering all the responses, and will take them into account in drawing up proposals for the next night restrictions regime. We hope to publish those proposals by the end of September. There will be a further consultation before the decisions on the next night restrictions regime for the three airports are taken.

The present night restrictions regime for those airports was established with effect from 24 October 1993. It proved to be contentious, and was subject to lengthy judicial review proceedings. Litigation in the United Kingdom courts came to an end in 1996, but a case is now before the European Court of Human Rights. I am sure that the House will accept that it would be improper for me to comment on that.

The present night restrictions specify a night period of 11 pm to 7 am during which the noisiest types of aircraft may not be scheduled to land or take off. In addition, from 11.30 pm to 6 am—the night quota period—aircraft movements are restricted by a movements limit and a noise quota, which are both set for a season. The noise quota is a supplementary measure designed to encourage the use of quieter aircraft. Aircraft count against the noise quota according to their noise "quota count" classification.

The quota count system is based on aircraft noise certification data. Aircraft are classified separately for landing and taking off by reference to data that are collected according to internationally agreed conditions and standards. The movements limits and noise quotas are set for the season as a whole; they are not subdivided across the hours of the night or between types of services, and airlines may operate services as they wish within the limits and quota available.

There are two seasons: the summer season—which equates to the period of British summer time as fixed by the Summer Time Act 1972—and the winter season, which is the rest of the year. Each summer season is about seven months long, and each winter season approximately five months. At Heathrow, last winter there were 2,446 movements which counted against the night movements limit of 2,550. In noise quota terms, they amounted to 3,858.5—a somewhat bizarre statistic—against the noise quota of 5,000.

In the 1997 summer season, there were 2,755 movements which counted against the movements limit of 3,250, amounting to 4,274.5 against the noise quota of 7,000. There were also some movements by aircraft that are exempt from the restrictions, because they are so small and quiet, some given dispensations in circumstances permitted under the present arrangements, and some emergencies, which are automatically exempted from the night restrictions.

Of more immediate relevance to the hon. Gentleman is the trial of runway alternation at night for landing aircraft that has been carried out by Heathrow Airport Ltd. at the request of the airport consultative committee. The results were presented to the consultative committee in April, but no formal recommendation has yet been made to the Department. The approval of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions would be required before runway alternation at night could be extended into the night period on a permanent basis, and may require additional consultation by the Department. We intend to take the subject forward in our second stage consultation paper on night restrictions.

As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, a westerly preference has been operated at Heathrow since 1962, with aircraft operating towards the west when there is a light easterly tailwind. The purpose is to reduce noise disturbance from departing aircraft taking off over the more densely populated areas to the east of the airport. It also means that landings over Windsor are reduced.

In 1996, work commissioned by the Heathrow Airport Consultative Committee confirmed that, during the day, there remains an overall environmental benefit from continued use of a westerly preference. However, at night, because almost all flights at Heathrow are arrivals in the early morning, the requirement to operate a westerly preference means that those aircraft are being routed over the more densely populated area of London than is strictly necessary, and it is right that it should be reviewed.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): My hon. Friend will be aware that, as Heathrow is in my constituency, the proximity of many of my constituents to Heathrow airport means that alternation is irrelevant. During the period of disturbance between 4 and 6 am every night, the noise is of such intensity that their sleep is disturbed and their entire environment is ruined. That is why I support the call by the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) for a total night ban, which is the only way to resolve the matter, as has been demonstrated in the report published this week by HACAN—the Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise.

Ms Jackson: My hon. Friend has highlighted a point that was made earlier by the hon. Member for Windsor and my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall—that noise disturbance from aircraft is not limited to those who live particularly near the three airports in question, albeit I acknowledge that my hon. Friend's constituency is very close to Heathrow. The issue of bans was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall. There has never been a ban on night flights, although it has been discussed in the past.

Initial analysis of the 4 am to 6 am period by my Department, and recently reported to the Heathrow Airport Consultative Committee, shows that, with the current arrangement of a westerly preference, the airport operates on westerlies for about 87 per cent. of the time.

[Ms Jackson]

With no preference, westerly operations would account for about 60 per cent. of the time on average—easterly operations accounting for the other 40 per cent.—and with an easterly preference operated, the proportion of easterly operations would rise to about 84 per cent. in the 4 am to 6 am period.

I stress that we have not taken a view on the merits or otherwise of the different possible runway preferences, and no decisions have been reached. There will be full public consultation. More work is needed, particularly on the noise impact of the various options on local communities. We also intend to invite views on modifying the operation of westerly preference at Heathrow at night in the second-stage paper of the current night restrictions consultation.

Mr. Trend: The Minister referred to trials in which planes are brought in at night from the west, of which I was aware. I have spoken about the need for a balance, and about hon. Members receiving no thanks for improving the balance but receiving considerable odium if it gets worse.

If the airport went to an easterly preference, even with alternation allowing both runways to land planes from the west because of low traffic, there would, instead of 80 per cent. landing over Windsor—a rise from the current 15 per cent.—be 40 per cent. landing over Windsor, which is 25 per cent. more than now, and 40 per cent. landing over St. Leonard's Hill to the south of Windsor, which currently experiences no substantial night disturbance. That would mean two angry communities. I implore the Minister to consider the balance of misery. It is unsatisfactory at present, but to disturb it would cause more trouble.

Ms Jackson: I can only repeat what I have said already. There has been no formal presentation to the Department on those trials, so we are not able to take a view. There is no possibility of any kind of change in the areas to which the hon. Gentleman referred without the most thorough public consultation.

We shall invite views on the possibility of modifying the operation of westerly preference in the second-stage paper of the current night restrictions consultation. The hon. Gentleman commented on British Airways' recent announcement in a press release on night-time operations that it supported a review of runway preferential use at night—not alternation—with a clear implication that it favoured an easterly preference. BA is entitled to its views, but we shall consult on the second night restrictions paper, which is due out the end of September.

The hon. Gentleman referred to aircraft landing at Heathrow in the very early morning, from about 4.30 am onwards. That reference is understandable, as such flights constitute the majority of night flights, at present, at Heathrow. They fly across Windsor when the wind is from the east, and they fly across central London when the wind is from the west. I am aware of complaints from both sides of the airport, as well as from all shades of the political spectrum.

The whole pattern of scheduling movements, particularly flights from the Asia-Pacific region, is a significant factor in the present pattern of early morning arrivals. The night curfew at Hong Kong Kai Tak contributed to that, but it was far from the only reason. We do not expect the pattern of movements to change radically, now that the new airport at Chep Lap Kok has opened.

There are very few departures at Heathrow during the night quota period, but some flights take off before our restrictions come into force, and land at sensitive times at other international airports. Any change to night restrictions at London airports that would have significant effects on intercontinental scheduling might have knock-on implications for some of our daytime traffic. We have specifically invited comments on that in our preliminary consultation paper on night restrictions.

We fully accept that aircraft noise, both by night and by day, is a contentious subject. Unfortunately, despite the great improvements made over the past 30 years, it is likely to remain so.

As I announced on 27 February, we are commissioning further research, initially on a trial basis, into the impact of aircraft noise at night. We are particularly interested in the scope for researching sleep prevention—that is, delay in getting to sleep at night—and the difficulties of not being able to get back to sleep again after being awakened in the early morning. However, we must not underestimate the complexities of such research, or the length of time that it may take.

It must also be acknowledged, as the hon. Member for Windsor has stated, that Heathrow airport is a major national asset. It occupies a position of central importance in international trade and communication in Europe, and in the UK's economy.

Heathrow is the busiest airport in Europe, and the busiest international airport in the world. In 1997, it handled nearly 58 million passengers, with 35 per cent. using the airport as an interchange point. It is used by more than 90 airlines, serving 180 destinations world wide. It is the UK's largest port in terms of value of trade handled, and it provides 56,000 direct jobs and a further 26,000 indirectly in support services: jobs that benefit people who live around the airport, as well as contributing to the prosperity of the country as a whole.

Successive Governments have consistently recognised the need to ensure that people who live near Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted are not exposed to excessive levels of aircraft at night. This Government equally recognise that need. We believe that it is both right and necessary to set restrictions on night flights at those airports, and, in doing so, to preserve a balance between environmental and aviation interests.

I thank the hon. Member for Windsor for giving us the opportunity to consider these issues and to help us, in conjunction with all the responses that we have received to the preliminary consultation, to determine the formal proposals that we shall put to consultation in the autumn.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Two o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 July 1998

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Lobbyists

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what restrictions are placed on political advisers in respect of use of their official position to further private interests or receive benefits from third parties. [49656]

Dr. David Clark *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* Special Advisers are required under paragraph 8 of the Civil Service Code not to misuse their official position or information acquired in the course of their official duties to further their private interests or those of others. They must not receive benefits of any kind from a third party which might reasonably be seen to compromise their political judgment or integrity.

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what recent representations he has received from *(a)* the Secretary of State for the Home Department and *(b)* the Minister without Portfolio in respect of the proposed Freedom of Information Bill. [50356]

Dr. David Clark: Both my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and my hon. Friend the Minister without Portfolio have continued to contribute to the discussions in the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Freedom of Information Bill.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49811]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will shortly publish figures showing the volume of correspondence which he, other individual Ministers and Agency Chief Executives received from hon. Members, the targets set for reply and the percentage of replies sent within target. Figures showing the average time taken by Ministers and Agency Chief Executives to respond to letters are not collated centrally.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49813]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The e-mail address of my Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit is mcu@ccta.gov.uk.

Civil Servants

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many members of the Home Civil Service have been on leave on full pay either between appointments or pending retirement from the Civil Service for *(a)* more than three months, *(b)* more than six months, *(c)* more than nine months and *(d)* more than one year. [28898]

Dr. David Clark: The information requested is not held centrally and is a matter for individual Departments. The figures for my own Department, including our Agencies, for the year 1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998 are as follows:

(a) Five (including two members of staff on long-term sick leave and one on maternity leave

(b) Zero

(c) Three

(d) One

Figures for previous years are not readily available.

The Central Office of Information (COI) is a separate Department reporting to me. There were no cases in COI matching the criteria.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Coalfields Report

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Government's response to the Coalfields Task Force report, "Making the Difference". [50402]

Mr. Prescott: Today, I will be announcing the Government's initial response to the Coalfields Task Force Report at the Coalfields Conference at Ollerton Miners Welfare in North Nottinghamshire.

I will launch a detailed programme of action for the coalfields at a second conference to be held in the Autumn.

Rural White Paper

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the range of issues to be covered in the Rural White Paper; and when it will be published. [48611]

Mr. Meacher: We are further considering the range of issues to be covered in our confirming review of rural policy.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which organisations attended consultation meetings with Ministers held in connection with the production of the Rural England White Paper, Command 3016. [48607]

Mr. Meacher: A number of seminars and other meetings took place in 1995 prior to the publication of the previous administration's White Paper, "Rural England" (Command 3016). They were attended by a range of organisations representing rural interests. A full list could be compiled only at disproportionate cost.

Homelessness (London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional costs are incurred within London in the provision of accommodation for the statutorily homeless; and what allowance he makes for this in the funding of London local government. [49440]

Mr. Raynsford: In 1996/97, net current expenditure by authorities in London on homelessness was £68m, which is equivalent to £9.61 per head of population. The corresponding figure for spending by authorities elsewhere in England was £51m, which is equivalent to £1.22 per head of population.

Different levels of expenditure may reflect variations in service and performance across Local authorities, not just costs.

The need for expenditure by local authorities on the provision of accommodation for the statutorily homeless is taken into account in the calculation of the 'other services' element of the standard spending assessments and hence in revenue support grant entitlements. The formula used to determine the amount for each local authority is given in *The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998/99* (HC506).

Refuse Disposal (London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional costs are incurred within London in the provision of refuse collection and disposal services; and what allowance he makes for this in funding London local government. [49439]

Mr. Raynsford: In 1996–97, net current expenditure by authorities in London on refuse collection was £76m, which is equivalent to £10.77 per head of population. The corresponding figure for spending by authorities elsewhere in England was £429m, which is equivalent £10.21 per head of population.

In 1996–97, net current expenditure by authorities in London on refuse disposal was £96m, which is equivalent to £13.54 per head of population. The corresponding figure for spending by authorities elsewhere in England was £451m, which is equivalent to £10.74 per head of population.

Different levels of expenditure may reflect variations in service and performance across Local Authorities, not just costs.

The need for expenditure by local authorities on the provision of refuse collection and disposal services is taken into account in the calculation of the 'other services' element of the standard spending assessments and hence in revenue support grant entitlements. The formula used to determine the amount for each local authority is given in *The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998/99* (HC506).

School Costs (London)

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional costs are incurred within London in the provision of *(a)* nursery, *(b)* primary and *(c)* secondary education; and what allowance he makes for this in his Department's funding of such provision. [49418]

Mr. Raynsford: In 1996–97, net current expenditure by authorities in London on the provision of nursery, primary and secondary education, and the corresponding figures for spending by authorities elsewhere in England was as shown in the following table.

	Authorities in London	*Authorities elsewhere in England*
Nursery and primary education	£1,362 million	£6,680 million
Secondary education	£800 million	£5,540 million
Special education	£250 million	£1,090 million
Total per pupil	£2,879	£2,385

Notes:

1. Nursery and primary education cannot be separately distinguished
2. Expenditure on special education cannot be divided between nursery, primary and secondary education
3. Expenditure per pupil cannot be calculated for each category, because numbers are not split. The pupil number used relates to the total number of pupils aged 5–15 in education as at January 1997.

Different levels of expenditure may reflect variations in service and performance across Local Authorities, not just in costs.

The need for expenditure by local authorities on nursery, primary and secondary eduction (including special education) is taken into account in the calculation of the corresponding elements of the standard spending assessments and hence in revenue support grant entitlements. The formula used to determine the amount for each local authority is given in *The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998/99* (HC506).

Connex South Central

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if a timetable for public consultation has been set in relation to the request by Connex South Central to the Rail Regulator for an extension of its current franchise from seven to 15 years; and if he will make a statement on the form such consultations will take. [49519]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a matter not for the Rail Regulator, but for the Franchising Director. The franchise agreement with Connex South Central allows for an extension of the franchise term to be negotiated with the Franchising Director. I understand that he has consulted the principal rail users' representatives on the enhancements proposed by Connex South Central. He will conclude his evaluation of Connex's bid in due course.

Regeneration

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many responses have been received to the discussion paper on 'Regeneration Programme—the way forward'; when the consultation period will end; what is the timetable for the implementation of proposals on regeneration policies; and if he will make a statement. [49684]

Angela Eagle: The discussion paper 'Regeneration Programmes—the Way Forward' was issued in November 1997. We received 145 written responses to the paper by the end of March 1998. Feedback was also received from regional seminars from a wide range of organisations and individuals involved in regeneration.

The responses revealed a broad consensus on a number of issues including:

the continued need for a regeneration programme that addresses the multiple causes of social and economic decline;

that, whilst retaining the benefits of competition, there should be a greater emphasis on the needs of the most deprived areas;

the need for a more collaborative approach to be taken by local partnerships and Government Offices to ensure a shared understanding of the regeneration needs of their areas;

that schemes should take better account of existing strategies for promoting economic development and tackling depravation.

The responses have been fed into the Comprehensive Spending Review of Regeneration Programmes, and it is hoped to announce proposals for future regeneration policies and programmes shortly.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects to make an announcement on the future of the Single Regeneration Budget; and if he will make a statement; [49730]

(2) what proposals he has for the SRB Challenge Fund; and if he will make a statement. [49729]

Angela Eagle: Under the Regional Development Agencies Bill, it is proposed that management of the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund (SRBCF) will be transferred from Government Offices for the Regions to the RDAs in April 1999. Different arrangements will apply in London, where it is proposed in the Greater London Authority White Paper that regeneration activity will become the responsibility of the Mayor, operating through the London Development Agency. Until the Mayor is established, the Government Office for London will continue to manage the SRBCF.

It is too early to say whether there will be a new (fifth) round of the SRBCF. Any announcement will be made in the light of the Comprehensive Spending Review, the outcome of which will be announced shortly.

Local Investment Fund

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of the local investment fund established in 1994 has been loaned to voluntary organisations; how many projects have failed and at what cost to the fund; and what action is proposed to replenish the fund. [49682]

Angela Eagle: The Department helped establish the Local Investment Fund with a one-off grant; the rest of the resources came from the private sector. The Fund makes loans to voluntary organisations, which cannot raise loans from conventional sources, to support their economically viable enterprises contributing to the regeneration of deprived communities.

I understand from the Fund that, since 1994, a total of £1.2 million has been lent, or committed, to eligible bodies. All the loans made so far either have been repaid in full or are currently on target to repay on schedule, so replenishment of capital is not an issue.

Empty Dwellings

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will extend the powers available to local authorities to deal with empty and unfit privately owned homes. [49731]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government are looking at the powers available to local authorities to tackle empty and unfit property in the private sector. We are conducting a review of the housing fitness standard and, alongside this, we are looking to see whether the current fitness enforcement procedures can be made more effective. We are also reviewing the efficiency of compulsory purchase and compensation law, including an assessment of the powers available to local authorities for dealing with housing.

Travel (Cheltenham)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what percentage of journeys to schools and further and higher education colleges in Cheltenham are made by *(a)* bicycle, *(b)* motor cycle and *(c)* car; [50056]

(2) what percentage of journeys to schools and further higher education colleges in Gloucestershire by district, are made by *(a)* bicycle, *(b)* motor cycle and *(c)* car; [50057]

(3) what percentage of journeys to work in Cheltenham are made by bicycle; [50054]

(4) what percentage of journeys to work in Gloucestershire, by district, are made by bicycle. [50055]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The percentages of journeys to work in Gloucestershire, by district, including Cheltenham, in 1991 are shown in the table.

Districts in Gloucestershire	*Percentage travelling to work by bicycle*
Cheltenham	7
Cotswold	5
Forest of Dean	1
Gloucester	6
Stroud	3
Tewkesbury	7

Source:
1991 Census

Data are not available for travel to school and colleges in Gloucestershire.

Unleaded Petrol

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the replacement of leaded petrol with the special grade of unleaded petrol containing lead substitutes will require adaptations to those engines in which it is used. [50025]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Engine adaptations should not be necessary for the majority of motorists who switch from leaded to unleaded petrol containing lead substitutes. This "lead replacement petrol" will be marketed with an equivalent octane level to that of leaded petrol and will contain a lead substitute that will provide satisfactory protection against engine wear under mixed motoring conditions. Increased wear of exhaust valve seats may arise in vehicles driven predominantly with high engine speeds or high loads. Should this condition occur, engine modifications would then become necessary.

Carlisle City Council

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to present to Parliament the Local Government Boundary Commission's proposal on the new ward arrangement for Carlisle City Council. [49733]

Mr. Raynsford: We have now made a preliminary decision to accept the final recommendations of the Local Government Commission for the districts of Cumbria. It is intended that the new arrangements will be established in time for the 1999 elections. Electoral Arrangement Orders are not subject to parliamentary procedure.

Railways

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from railway operating companies on the introduction of direct services from the regions to mainland Europe. [49955]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Virgin Group have made proposals to the Government and to London and Continental Railways, which are responsible for the management and operation of the Eurostar business. These proposals are being considered as part of the review of regional services which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced in his statement to the House on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 367–70.

Eurostar

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Virgin Rail's proposals to run Eurostar trains on a regional basis. [49746]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 367–70, that the consortium chosen by LCR to operate Eurostar had been asked to review urgently the feasibility of regional Eurostar services, and to report to the Government before the end of the year. He has asked that proposals from the Virgin Group should be considered as part of that review.

Shipping (Investment)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage investment in United Kingdom shipping companies; and if he will make a statement. [49947]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are committed to reversing the decline in the UK merchant fleet and increasing employment and training opportunities for UK seafarers. That is why the Deputy Prime Minister established a Shipping Working Group late last year to look at ways to revitalise the British shipping industry. A shipping policy paper will follow publication of the White Paper on Integrated Transport.

Mobile Telephones (Drivers)

Sir Patrick Cormack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce legislation to make it an offence for drivers to use hand-held mobile telephones in moving vehicles. [49785]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* The police have advised that the offences of

"careless and inconsiderate driving"

and

"failing to have proper control of a vehicle"

provide them with sufficient powers to prosecute, where appropriate, people driving while using a hand-held mobile phone. The publicity campaign launched on 16 March by my noble Friend the Minister for Roads aims to educate drivers about the dangers of using phones while on the move.

Number Plates

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultations the Government have had with companies involved with the manufacture and distribution of vehicle number plates about the proposed change in format; and if he will make a statement. [49959]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) on 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *470*.

Local Authority Planning

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 19 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *330*, what assessment he has made of the potential impact of the proposals recently issued by the London and South East Regional Planning Conference on housing need in the region; and what steps he plans in response to the Conference's statement that insufficient housing provision will be made for single people on low incomes. [50244]

Mr. Caborn: The London and South East Regional Planning Conference (SERPLAN) is consulting on the draft strategy for the SE which assumes that a proportion of the new single households expected up to 2016 will not need separate accommodation. SERPLAN will need to consider the responses made to it during the consultation before preparing draft revised regional planning guidance. Draft guidance will be subject to a public examination in Spring next year before being issued by the Secretary of State. It is important that SERPLAN fully justifies the assumption it has made on single households, and that it makes clear the consequences of not fully providing for the housing needs of the projected number of households in the region.

Integrated Transport Policy

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the disability organisations whom he consulted in drawing up his forthcoming integrated transport policy. [50002]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* Between August and November 1997, we carried out an extensive consultation as part of the fundamental review of transport policy. Over 25,000 copies of the consultation document were issued and over 7,000 organisations including the Disabled Persons Advisory Committee and members of the public responded in writing, a number of whom were disabled people or representatives of disability groups. In addition, Ministers attended a number of seminars to discuss a wide range of transport issues, including those of particular interest to disabled people, and we have held several meetings with disability organisations. The discussions and the written representations we received have played an important role in informing the development of our integrated transport policy.

Vehicle Fuel

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average cost of converting *(a)* a bus and *(b)* a HGV to run on (i) compressed natural gas and (ii) liquidefied petroleum gas. [50331]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The cost of converting these vehicles to run on compressed natural gas is approximately £12,500 for small to medium lorries and buses rising to about £18,000 to £25,000 for the largest lorries and buses. Costs for conversion to liquefied petroleum gas, where suitable engines are available, are understood to be of a similar order.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49814]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49816]

Angela Eagle: My Ministerial Support Unit does not currently have an e-mail address; we hope to be able to receive electronic mail in the Department by the end of the year. I shall write to the hon. Member when the system is fully operational.

Recycled Land

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 23 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–31, what types of land he includes within his definition of recycled land. [49853]

Mr. Raynsford: As we explained in *Planning for the Communities of the Future*, which was launched by the Secretary of State on 23 February, the Government are currently setting up a National Land Use Database. This will provide a comprehensive national picture of previously developed sites including derelict land and vacant buildings, which may be available for development. We are in the final stages of drawing up the list of site types and characteristics which will be covered by that database, following which we will be commissioning local authorities to undertake the identification work.

At the same time, we also announced that we would be issuing a discussion paper on the definitions of previously developed land and the issue of regional recycling targets. This will be available shortly.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the value of suburban and urban back gardens in the context of his target of 60 per cent. of development being concentrated on recycled land. [49855]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has not made a specific evaluation of the contribution back gardens can make to the supply of previously developed urban land for housing, although it is felt that this is likely to be small by comparison to other, previously developed sites. Developments on back gardens are included in the totals in the Department's monitoring the reuse of land; however, they cannot be separately identified.

Eco Management and Audit Scheme

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if in developing his proposals for best value, he will ensure that the Eco Management and Audit Scheme for local government is recognised as an acceptable quality management system. [49893]

Mr. Raynsford: Quality Management systems, including the Eco Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), will be important management tools in the delivery of best value. However, the extent to which they are used by local authorities will be essentially a matter for them to decide in the light of their own local circumstances and priorities.

Where services under best value are to be provided by the private sector, local authorities may specify that contractors establish an EMAS, but in so doing they will need to comply with the EC Procurement Directives.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many local authorities have been accredited under the Eco Management and Audit Scheme; [49891]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to promote the use of Eco Management and Audit within local government. [49892]

Angela Eagle: At present, two local authorities are registered under the Eco Management and Audit Scheme for United Kingdom Local Government (LA-EMAS). The London Borough of Sutton has registered twenty-six separate units covering various operations, and Stratford-on-Avon District Council has registered all its departments and services apart from its Housing Service. The Housing Service will be included in Stratford-on-Avon's application for reregistration of all their services at the end of July. Hereford City Council, which was the first local authority to register all its operations, was obliged to withdraw from the scheme earlier this year when it ceased to exist as a separate authority. The new unitary council, the County of Herefordshire District Council, expect to register their Planning Services in 1999 and intend to register all their operations by the year 2003.

My Department has produced a full range of free publicity about LA-EMAS, including guidance notes, case studies and a video. It also works closely with the Local Government Management Board to encourage local authorities to participate in the scheme, and is jointly funding a Help-Desk which provides information and runs workshops as well as monitoring the progress of authorities towards full participation. 53 councils (11 per cent. of all 472 local authorities prior to restructuring in April 1998) have committed themselves to achieving external recognition by either EMAS or ISO 14001. A further 106 councils are currently implementing an environmental management system but have not yet decided whether they will seek registration under EMAS or certification to the international standard ISO 14001.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the respondents to the consultation paper on improving local financial accountability explicitly supported its proposals to replace capping. [49890]

Mr. Raynsford: We have received 387 responses to the consultation paper on improving local financial accountability which address capping issues, the majority of which support the end of crude and universal capping. We have received a wide range of views about what, if anything, should replace it and are still analysing these responses.

Suburban and Urban Gardens

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the wildlife value and recreational opportunities presented by suburban and urban gardens. [49854]

Angela Eagle: Suburban and urban gardens have considerable local value for wildlife and such gardens cover an estimated 3 per cent. of Britain's land surface. Gardens form important wildlife habitats in urban areas and are the place where the majority of the public enjoy their day to day contact with nature.

It is difficult to determine the recreational opportunities that suburban and urban gardens provide. However, it is clear that they offer scope for a range of informal recreational activities which will vary according to the size and type of garden.

Suburban gardens make excellent bird habitats and the number of different species they hold is often higher than that in nearby rural areas and always greater than that of the inner city. One in ten gardens has a pond and this has proved important to the common frog at a time when its population declined in many parts of the countryside. British town gardens have some of the best developed communities of plants growing on walls in Europe.

Approximately 30,000 species of animals are found in Britain and it is believed that about 25 per cent. occur in gardens. A single garden in Leicester had 2,200 species of plant and animal recorded there between 1973 and 1986 and this is likely to be reasonably representative of many medium gardens.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's policy on development taking place in suburban and urban gardens. [49856]

Mr. Raynsford: Current planning policy on this issue is set out in detail in paragraph 26 of Planning Policy Guidance note 3 (Housing), which was issued by the last Administration. This states that:

"Homes with large back gardens are a common feature in many urban, suburban and village areas. Sometimes it may be acceptable to develop back gardens for new housing which is in keeping with the character and quality of the local environment. Where development of back garden or back land is allowed, it will require careful planning. For example, there must be proper means of access, which is convenient and safe for both drivers and pedestrians, and adequate provision for car parking. There must be adequate space between old and new buildings to avoid spoiling the amenity of neighbouring houses, for example, by overshadowing. Sensitive design and good landscaping are particularly important if new buildings are to be fitted successively into small vacant sites in established residential areas. "Tandem" development, consisting of one house immediately behind another and sharing the same access, is generally unsatisfactory because of the difficulties of access to the house at the back and the disturbance and lack of privacy suffered by the house in front".

The Government are currently revising PPG3, and will be issuing a draft for consultation later this summer.

Cycling

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the existing provision of secure cycle parking areas; and what steps are being taken to increase the provision of urban cycle routes. [49680]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The responsibility for on-street cycle parking rests with individual local authorities. Parking can also be provided at destinations such as schools, transport interchanges and workplaces by those responsible for the sites. Good-quality cycle parking is essential to overcome the fear of theft that is an important factor deterring more people from cycling. We have issued advice to practitioners to assist in the choice of the best locations for cycle parking in our Traffic Advisory Leaflet 7/97, "Supply and Demand for Cycle Parking".

The provision of urban cycle routes is also the responsibility of local authorities. We give advice on the design and construction of cycle facilities in our Local Transport Note publications on cycling and in our Traffic Advisory Leaflets which are issued to all local authorities.

We are encouraging all local authorities to provide better facilities for cycling as part of our support for the National Cycling Strategy and its objective of increasing cycling fourfold by 2012.

Vacant Housing

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is undertaking to reduce the number of vacant housing units; and what plans he has to encourage the development of an empty property strategy through public-private partnerships. [49678]

Mr. Raynsford: The majority of empty properties are in private ownership. Our aim is to make better use of these as part of our strategy for planning for household growth in the future.

We will continue to encourage local authorities to develop empty property strategies in their areas, in partnership with local public and private agencies. About 200 authorities have strategies in place or under development. My Department is providing funding to the Empty Homes Agency to work with authorities to bring more empty commercial property back into housing use and to assist rural authorities in drawing up successful strategies.

We have made extra money available to local authorities for renovating and improving stock through the Capital Receipts Initiative. Capital funding is also available through the Housing Investment Programme, the Single Regeneration Budget and the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme.

Brown-field Regeneration

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in ensuring that Government targets for brown-field regeneration are met within the current unitary development plans. [49679]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government expect local authorities to make full and effective use of previously developed land both when allocating land for housing in their local plans and UDPs and when they decide planning applications. Authorities are making good progress towards that goal. Currently nationally over half of all new dwellings are being built on previously used sites.

In February, the Government announced in *Planning for the Communities of the Future* that they expected local authorities to be able to raise the national proportion of new homes to be built on previously developed land to 60 per cent. over the next 10 years. The same document went on to announce that the Government expect regional planning conferences to draw up regional recycling targets. This is because some regions will already be close to, or achieving, the national target, whilst others may be unable to match it because of their geographical and other circumstances.

Fishing (Safety)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *461*, what assessment he has made of the causes of fishing accidents resulting in the loss of life at sea in each of the last three years. [50388]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Marine Accidents Investigation Branch assesses the causes of all fishing vessel accidents where there is loss of life, as well any other, less serious, accidents. Individual investigations involve a comprehensive appraisal of all available evidence which might include the interviewing of survivors, underwater surveys of wrecks, and technical assessments of the vessels.

Recommendations are made to those best placed to take appropriate action, and lessons to be learned are published in MAIB's Safety Digest which is distributed widely to fishing companies, skippers, fishermen's missions and associations, and the fishing press.

The Safety Digest comprises individual reports as well as an overview statement relating to accidents in the fishing industry. Action is continuing on a number of fronts to improve the regrettably worsening fatality rate in the fishing industry and I am fully supportive of MAIB's role in this.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review his Department's policy on the non-recovery of bodies lost at sea. [50421]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The recovery of bodies is covered in the consultation paper on fishing vessel accidents and the recovery of those lost at sea. The responses to the paper will be carefully considered and the results of the consultation process announced before the end of the year. We will review our position in the light of those results.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he made of the representations he received on the proposed Code of Safe Practice for Smaller Fishing Vessels which was subsequently withdrawn. [50352]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The representations received on the proposed Code of Safe Practice For Fishing Vessels of Less than 12m Registered Length, following consultation in the summer and autumn of 1997, have been considered by the Steering Committee responsible for the development of the Code. Concerns about the complexity of the Code and the cost of compliance, together with points of details, are being taken into account in developing a revised code which will deliver a genuine improvement in safety without placing an undue financial burden on fishermen.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the proposed consultation paper on maritime safety in the fishing industry. [50389]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The consultation paper will be issued shortly.

Roads

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the daily and hourly peak traffic flows along *(a)* the M42 from Junctions 7 to 11 and *(b)* the M6 (i) from Junctions 4 to 10 and (ii) from Junctions 10 to 16, (1) in each of the last five years and (2) at present; [50246]

(2) what are the projected traffic flows along *(a)* the M42 from Junctions 7 to 11 and *(b)* the M6 (i) from Junctions 4 to 10 and (ii) from Junctions 10 to 16 in (1) 2000, (2) 2005, (3) 2010, (4) 2015 and (5) 2020. [50247]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Brian Jenkins, dated 13 July 1998:

The Transport Minister, Glenda Jackson, has asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to reply to your questions about past and current traffic flows and future projections for sections of the M42 and M6 motorways in the West Midlands. In his absence, I am writing on his behalf.

The average daily and peak flows for M42 junctions 7 to 11 and M67 junctions 4 to 16 are shown on Annex 1 attached. The table shows traffic flows on individual links (ie from junction to junction). The flows for 1993 to 1997 are based on averages of the available count data over the whole year for each of the sections of motorway, whilst the 1998 estimate is an average based on available data between January and May.

Forecasts of traffic flows over the same sections of M6 and M42 motorways are shown on the table at Annex 2. These have been produced by applying National Road Traffic Forecast (NRTF) central estimate factors (for urban or rural motorways as appropriate) to the 1997 annual estimates. They do not attempt to take into account any future changes in the road network or the effects of network constraints on the ability of the motorways to accommodate future traffic growth.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Annex 1: Annual traffic flows 1993–1997 and to May 1998

	To May 1998		*1997*		*1996*		*1995*		*1994*		*1993*	
	Daily	*Peak*	*Daily*	*Peak*	*Daily*	*Peak*	*Daily*	*Peak*	*Daily*	*Peak*	*Daily*	*Peak*
M42												
J7A-8	'—	'—	74	6	80	6	81	6	65	8	66	5
J8–9	79	6	80	6	78	6	80	6	'—	'—	65	6
J8–10	66	5	63	5	63	5	60	5	57	5	52	4
J10–11	51	4	50	4	52	4	50	4	47	4	43	3
M6												
J4–4A	98	7	98	7	94	6	91	6	87	8	66	8
J4A-5	'—	'—	135	9	132	9	128	9	124	9	125	9
J5–6	115	7	114	7	111	7	'—	'—	'—	'—	106	8
J6–7	134	9	131	8	126	8	120	8	111	8	116	8
J7A-8	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—	'—
J8E-8W (Ray Hall)	91	6	99	6	98	6	97	6	95	6	97	6
J9–10	144	10	150	10	147	9	129	8	139	9	'—	'—
J10–10a	131	9	132	9	132	9	133	9	128	9	134	9
J11–12	138	9	111	8	135	9	131	9	132	9	107	7
J12–13	100	7	102	7	110	7	99	7	95	6	94	6
J13–14	101	7	105	7	103	7	100	7	100	7	'—	'—
J14–15	'—	'—	'—	'—	97	7	94	6	'—	'—	'—	'—
J15–18	98	7	98	7	96	7	92	6	95	6	87	6

' No data

Notes:

1. All flows are two way, rounded to the nearest thousand vehicles
2. All estimates averaged over available data for the year

Annex 2: Traffic flows forecast from 1997

	1997	*2000*	*2005*	*2010*	*2015*	*2020*
M42						
J7A-8	74	81	93	106	119	132
J8–9	80	88	101	115	129	143
J9–10	63	69	80	91	102	113
J10–11	50	55	63	72	81	89
M6						
J4–4A	98	104	113	122	129	135
J4A-5	135	143	156	168	177	196
J5–6	114	121	132	142	150	158
J6–7	131	139	151	163	172	181

Annex 2: Traffic flows forecast from 1997

	[1]1997	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
J8E-8W (Ray Hall)	99	105	114	123	130	136
J9–10	150	159	173	188	198	208
J10–10a	132	140	153	165	174	183
J11–12	111	121	140	159	179	198
J12–13	102	111	129	146	164	182
J13–14	105	115	132	151	169	187
J15–16	98	107	124	141	158	175

[1]Two-way flow, 7 day average, 24 hours

Notes:

1. All flows rounded to the nearest 1,000 vehicles per annual average 24 hour day
2. NRTF97 motorway central growth factors applied—rural/urban as appropriate
3. Projections make no allowance for future network changes or constraints

Airports

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the regulations of the allocation and operation of airport landing and take-off rights; and if he will make a statement. [50377]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The European Community has full competence for policy on the allocation of slots for take-offs and landings at airports. The legal framework for this is set out in EC Regulation 95/93 on common rules for the allocation of slots at Community airports. We are still awaiting a proposal from the Commission to revise the current slots regulation. The UK intends to take an active role in responding to that proposal in the Council of Ministers.

Retirement Homes

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigations he has made into the purchase of managed freehold retirement homes; if he will assess the advantages of regulating the contracts entered into by purchasers of these homes; and if he will make a statement. [50168]

Mr. Raynsford: We have conducted no research into the purchase of managed freehold retirement homes. We are looking generally at the market for house purchases, but at present there are no plans to look at the purchase of retirement properties separately.

Shipping

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those measures undertaken by his Department to support British shipping since 1 May 1997. [50434]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Deputy Prime Minister established a Shipping Working Group late last year to look at ways to reverse the decline in the UK merchant fleet and to increase employment and training opportunities for UK seafarers. A shipping policy paper, based on the work of the Shipping Working Group, will follow publication of the White Paper on Integrated Transport.

My Department launched the new Support for Maritime Training (SMarT) scheme on 1 April 1998. We have already allocated 30 per cent. more to the SMarT budget than the total grant payments under the previous training schemes in 1997–98 and, whilst 465 new cadets were recruited last year, we have agreed funding for 643 new cadets this year on the basis of industry bids.

Merchant Navy Day

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received calling for the establishment of an official Merchant Navy Day; and if he will make a statement. [49557]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since the election, there have been five written representations from the Merchant Navy Association, and eighty-nine from members of the Association writing in a personal capacity. Of the latter, fifty-one have been letters from MPs on behalf of their constituents.

Pesticides

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures are taken to conduct post marketing surveillance on cases of suspected adverse reactions or pesticides incidents reported to the relevant authorities after initial investigation by those authorities in order to determine any long-term effects. [50343]

Angela Eagle: Investigated incidents of alleged ill-health involving pesticides are assessed by the Health and Safety Executive's Pesticides Incident Appraisal Panel (PIAP) so that new issues and trends can be identified. The independent Veterinary Products Committee's (VPC's) Appraisal Panel for Human Suspected Adverse Reactions (SARs) evaluates reports of SARs for the same purposes as PIAP. The Advisory Committee on Pesticides and VPC respectively are then informed so that any necessary action can be taken. In addition, the Government sponsor specific research projects to investigate possible health effects of pesticides and veterinary medicines, including long-term effects.

Tesco

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what discussions (i) Ministers and (ii) officials have had, concerning the possibility of taxes or charges on car parking spaces at out-of-town shopping centres with *(a)* Tesco and *(b)* partners or employees of the firm Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement; [50157]

(2) if he will list the occasions upon which ministers and officials have had contact with Tesco plc or their representatives or advisers. [50159]

Mr. Prescott: I refer the right hon. Member to my reply to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) of 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *649*.

We have carried out an extensive consultation as part of the fundamental review of transport policy. In addition, my Ministers and I have met with a large number of individuals and organisations and have attended a number of seminars to discuss a wide range of transport issues. The discussions and the written representations we received have played an important role in informing the development of our integrated transport policy.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many safety reports on Sellafield have been completed by the Health and Safety Executive over the last five years; and have been withheld from public release under the provisions of section 28 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. [47876]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), as the statutory nuclear safety regulator, produces a large number of internal documents each year which relate to safety at Sellafield. These are working documents produced as part of the dialogue between HSE and BNFL about what actions must be taken to comply with the law and to maintain or improve standards of safety. They can range from single page minutes to more substantial documents.

Because they contain material obtained in pursuance of HSE's regulatory duties, most of these working documents are subject to the restrictions on their disclosure provided for under Section 28 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. It must be understood, however, that Section 28 also provides for exceptions to these restrictions, empowering HSE to make regulatory information public at any time if it believes that this is necessary to discharge its statutory functions to protect the health and safety of workers and the public.

It is HSE's policy to be as open as possible about issues which arise in respect of nuclear sites. To this end, HSE site inspectors produce regular reports which are given to the Local Community Liaison Committee for each licensed site. In addition, HSE publishes reports summarising the important aspects of major decisions or investigations. HSE has published ten such reports in the last five years.

PRIME MINISTER

Chief of the Defence Staff

Mr. Maples: To ask the Prime Minister what meetings he had with the Chief of the Defence Staff between 25 June and 2 July; and if the meetings were at the request of the Chief of the Defence Staff. [49549]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* Ministerial colleagues and I met a large number of people, both service personnel and others in the period prior to the publication of the Strategic Defence Review, the most open and inclusive review of Britain's armed forces ever undertaken and in particular, at my request, I met the Chief of the Defence Staff on 29 June.

Rio Summit, May 1999

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister who will represent Her Majesty's Government at the Rio summit in May 1999 on Latin American, Caribbean and European countries, mutual concerns and the environment. [48629]

The Prime Minister: The date for the EU/Latin America/Caribbean Summit planned for Rio in 1999 has yet to be fixed. The Government will take a decision on UK representation once a date has been agreed.

China

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister if he will raise human rights issues during his forthcoming visit to China. [50424]

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister if he will ensure that details of all contacts, formal and informal, between Government ministers and lobbyists are recorded and made available for parliamentary scrutiny. [50169]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *600*.

European Aerospace and Defence Industry

Mr. Pound: To ask the Prime Minister what action he has taken to co-ordinate Government activity in the restructuring of the European aerospace and defence industry. [50646]

The Prime Minister: I have established a new Ministerial Group (MISC5) to develop Government policy and co-ordinate related activity in this area. The Group will be chaired by the President of the Board of Trade.

The terms of reference and membership are as follows:

Ministerial Group on the Restructuring of the European Aerospace and Defence Industry (MISC5)

Composition

President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

Secretary of State for Defence

Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Paymaster General

Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry

Terms of Reference

"To develop Government policy and co-ordinate related activity in promoting the restructuring of the European aerospace and defence industry."

Constitutional Reform

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will establish a Royal Commission to consider reform of the House of Lords. [49749]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Fendle (Mr. Prentice) on 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *357*.

DEFENCE

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49849]

Mr. Spellar: My Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit does not currently have an e-mail address; however, we plan to set one up shortly.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *355*, concerning departmental vehicles, if he will supply such information as is available without incurring disproportionate cost. [49965]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member in due course and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Reserves

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was *(a)* the establishment and *(b)* the strength of (i) the Royal Naval Reserve, (ii) the Royal Marine Reserve, (iii) the Territorial Army and (iv) the Royal Auxiliary Air Force on 1 April in each year from 1990 to 1998. [47298]

Dr. Reid: The figures are given in the table.

Establishment and strength of Volunteer Reserve Forces on 1 April

	1990	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Royal Naval Reserve establishment	7.5	7.5	4.7	4.7	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
Royal Naval Reserve strength	5.9	5.9	4.7	4.5	3.6	2.8	2.6	2.7	2.8
Royal Marines Reserve establishment	1.6	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.0
Royal Marines Reserve strength	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
Territorial Army establishment	85.3	86.0	72.0	68.0	64.0	59.0	59.0	59.0	59.0
Territorial Army strength	71.5	72.1	70.1	67.2	63.6	58.4	55.9	56.2	55.6
Royal Auxiliary Air Force establishment	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.8	2.3
Royal Auxiliary Air Force strength	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.6	1.6	1.2	1.0	1.4	1.6

Notes:
1. Figures are expressed in thousands to one decimal place
2. Territorial Army figures do not include Non Regular Permanent Staff
3. The Royal Auxiliary Air Force and the war appointable element of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve amalgamated on 1 April 1997

Trainer Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 18 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *265–66*, what assessment he has made of the employment consequences for the UK of the award of the contract for the replacement of the Bulldog trainer aircraft; and what discussions he had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment concerning the costs to public funds of those consequences. [48040]

Dr. Reid: Assessments were made of the employment consequences for the UK for each of the bids for the Royal Air Force Light Aircraft Flying Task contract. These assessments included the consequences for employment at the University Air Squadron locations, the competing bidders and the aircraft manufacturers. Assessments were made in consultation with officials from the Department of Trade and Industry and the Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Government Office.

Parliamentary Question

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to reply to the question from the hon. Member for Ludlow for answer on 19 June relating to the Bilderberg meeting (Ref. 46988). [50351]

Mr. George Robertson: I replied to the hon. Member on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *659*.

Departmental Holdings

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to paragraph 192 of the Strategic Defence Review, if he will include representatives of *(a)* the National Farmers Union, *(b)* the Tenant Farmers Association and *(c)* the Scottish Crofters Union as appropriate in respect of the management and disposal of Ministry of Defence rural holdings; and if he will make a statement. [50376]

Mr. Spellar: We have undertaken to consult a number of environmental and conservation bodies about our future rural estate strategy. We would be happy also to seek the views of the bodies listed and will contact them later in the year.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sudan

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the need to improve access for humanitarian aid in Sudan. [50162]

Clare Short: The civil war in Sudan is preventing food reaching many starving people. Access to those in need is vital to the relief operation. I have had recent discussions with the Executive Directors of the World Food

Programme and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on this question. While the position has improved, we need to maintain pressure on the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army to ensure that enough access is provided to allow relief agencies to reach all vulnerable people. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited Nairobi and Khartoum on 14–16 July to help secure this access.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with *(a)* non-governmental organisations and *(b)* aid agencies in the past three weeks over the crisis in Sudan. [50164]

Clare Short: I met the Directors of Action Aid, Christian Aid, the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Save the Children Fund (SCF) and Oxfam on 23 June and the Executive Director of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on 9 July. My officials maintain frequent contact with all NGOs and agencies helping to alleviate the crisis in Sudan and regularly update me on the situation.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the current need for further humanitarian aid for Sudan. [50163]

Clare Short: On 23 June, the World Food Programme increased its assessment of need and estimated that 10,573 tonnes of food need to be delivered each month until the end of October to stabilise the situation in the south. But, as more access becomes possible, new needs will emerge and we expect this figure to be revised.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support is being provided to *(a)* the Nuba Relief Rehabilitation and Development Society and *(b)* other agencies working in the Nuba region of Sudan to overcome food shortages; and if she will make a statement. [49693]

Clare Short: We have received no requests from the Nuba Relief Rehabilitation and Development Society for support. Access to parts of the Nuba region by the United Nations continues to be denied by the Government of Sudan. We, along with other Governments and the United Nations, are pressing the Sudanese Government to agree access to all areas. We provide financial support to the World Food Programme and the UNICEF Nutrition Programme in Sudan. These programmes work to overcome food shortages throughout the whole of Sudan, including those parts of the Nuba region to which they have access.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what contacts have been established with refugee Sudanese organisations based in the United Kingdom with particular reference to the Nubian International Relief and Development Council; what discussions have been held regarding the current political and economic situation in that country; and if she will make a statement. [49690]

Clare Short: Officials have had discussions with United Kingdom-based refugee Sudanese organisations but the Nubian International Relief and Development Council has not approached the Department for International Development (DFID). I have had discussions with my Foreign and Commonwealth colleagues on the political and economic situation and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), the Minister for State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has been involved in discussions within the framework of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development SudanPartners Forum. He is in Nairobi tomorrow for discussions with the Government of Kenya and the Sudan People's Liberation Army and will be travelling on to Khartoum for talks with the Government of Sudan on 15/16 July.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support is being provided to Operation Lifeline Sudan, organised by the UN; what discussions have taken place with the Government of Sudan regarding access to the areas affected by famine; and if she will make a statement. [49692]

Clare Short: We have committed £24 million in support of Operation Lifeline Sudan activities since February. We have pressed the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army at all levels in Khartoum, Nairobi and London to allow full access to all vulnerable people. During our Presidency of the European Union, we led discussions on Sudan in the General Affairs Council and the Development Council which emphasised the need for all member states to make similar representations.

Colombia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's work in assisting vocational education in Colombia. [48632]

Clare Short: We are currently supporting, at a cost of £771,563, the second phase of a project with the Colombian Adult Vocational Training Service (SENA) designed to enhance training programmes for farmers in post-harvest fruit and vegetable management. The aim of the project is to create income and employment opportunities for the rural poor, by facilitating an increase in the quality and marketable quantity of fruit and vegetables in the post harvest chain.

In addition, a number of NGO projects which have helped to train Colombian community groups in marketing, business and other vocational skills have been supported through our Joint Funding Scheme.

Know-how Fund

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what has been the financial contribution to date of the Know-how Fund in developing a bakery training school at St. Petersburg, Russia; and how much further funding is currently planned. [49948]

Clare Short: My Department has contributed £415,427 to date towards the development of the Leningrad Minibakeries Training Centre through a Know-how Fund project. The first phase of this project ended in May. The final cost to Department for International Development of the first phase will be approximately £480,000. A second phase of support began in June. We plan to provide approximately £100,000 of funding under this second phase, which will finish in June 1999. We have no plans for further funding beyond that date.

Chernobyl (Children)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department is giving in the current year to help children suffering the effects of the Chernobyl disaster; and if she will make a statement. [50037]

Clare Short: We are providing assistance for the effects of the Chernobyl disaster mainly through the multilateral agencies such as the World Health Organisation.

In addition, in Belarus we are supporting Chernobyl charities through our Small Grants Scheme. We will fund a workshop in September 1998, through the Know-how Fund in collaboration with the charity Chernobyl Children's Life-Line, which will bring 12 people from Belarus to visit UK hospitals and social services here. Also under the Know-how Fund, and in collaboration with Chernobyl Children's Life-Line, we are preparing a project to support foster homes in Belarus.

Schools (Computers)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support she plans to give to programmes to increase the number of computers in schools in developing countries. [49621]

Clare Short: As our White Paper makes clear, we are strongly committed to the key international targets of universal primary education and gender equality in primary education by 2005. These targets will not be achieved unless we take advantage of appropriate technologies at all levels of education to up-grade teaching skills and enhance teaching and learning at all levels. In this respect books, journals and computer technology all have a significant part to play.

The Department for International Development (DFID) education projects are being implemented in many of the poorer areas of developing countries which lack basic school infrastructure, such as secure buildings and electricity, to support computer technology. In such places, our priority is geared towards the attainment of basic literacy and the provision of at least minimum facilities.

Nevertheless, we understand the increasing importance of computer technology in education. We support the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). Based in Vancouver, its purpose is to create and widen access to opportunities for learning via the application of communication technologies to education. We are funding a number of studies through COL to increase understanding of problems and practicalities of introducing new technologies and distance education in developing countries.

A number of our bilateral education projects include the provision of computers in, for example, resource centres where they are used to deliver teacher education programmes.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will give a breakdown of aid to Sri Lanka by the Government in the last 10 years. [49683]

Clare Short: The breakdown of UK Government's development assistance to Sri Lanka over the last 10 years is set out in the table. Final figures for 1997/98 are not yet available. Details are contained in the annual publication of British Aid Statistics, copies of which are in the Library of the House.

Bilateral aid to Sri Lanka

£000

Technical co-operation (exc ATP)	*1987–88*	*1988–89*	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Financial aid (exc ATP)	2,181	4,848	5,289	1,654	1,658	1,260	445	1,163	1,530	896
Generation and transfer of knowledge	4,060	5,498	5,463	4,979	5,437	4,645	4,378	4,122	3,875	3,367
Grants and other aid in kind	1,900	1,832	1,818	4,274	2,467	1,941	2,250	2,058	1,918	2,371
Aid and trade provision	5,496	7,230	1,248	2,845	591	573	166	67	71	127
Programme aid	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Emergency aid[1]	163	350	178	194	570	282	584	519	100	—
DFID debt relief[2]	1,589	1,589	1,589	1,589	1,427	1,174	1,013	764	526	350
Total DFID programme	15,389	21,348	15,586	15,537	12,149	9,876	8,836	8,693	8,020	7,111
CDC investments	7,575	4,157	2,042	2,042	288	6,740	4,010	2,787	6,605	12,526
Other[3]	—	—	—	—	13	—	29	1	23	—
Total gross public expenditure	22,964	25,505	17,628	17,579	12,450	16,616	12,875	11,481	14,647	19,637

[1] Emergency Aid includes disaster relief and short term refuge

[2] This comprises only principal forgone under Retrospective Terms Adjustment

[3] This is all drug related assistance funded by the Home Office and the FCO

Source:

Statistics Department Database

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the e-mail address of her Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49843]

Clare Short: The e-mail address is as follows:

Enquiry@dfid.gtnet.gov.uk.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what target her Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49841]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans her Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49842]

Clare Short: I will write to the hon. Member.

Banana Producers

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what European Union funding is being provided to banana producers in ACP countries; and if she will make a statement. [49723]

Clare Short: I will write to my hon. Friend.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport under what circumstances the public sector will be able to assume ownership of the redeveloped Wembley Stadium or claw back public investment. [49889]

Mr. Banks: All Lottery Sports Fund grant awards are subject to clawback provisions as a mandatory condition of award. Clawback provisions in relation to the stadium will be included within the projects formal Lottery Funding Agreement and can be invoked if this is broken.

Television Licences

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were prosecuted for non-payment of their television licences in South Yorkshire in the past 12 months. [49618]

Mr. Fisher: Prosecutions for television licence fee evasion are not recorded separately from other offences under the Wireless Telegraphy Acts of 1949 and 1967, although the great majority of offences under these Acts relate to licence fee evasion. Provisional figures for 1997, the most recent year for which information is available, show 2,544 prosecutions under the wireless Telegraphy Acts in the South Yorkshire Police Force area.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what would be the cost of introducing free television licences for all households containing a pensioner aged over *(a)* 70 and *(b)* 75 years of age. [48955]

Mr. Fisher *[holding answer 6 July 1998] [pursuant to his reply, 8 July 1998, c. 552]:* The estimated cost of providing free television licences for all 'pensioner only' households where at least one member has reached the age of 70 is £288 million, and the estimated cost of free television licences for all 'pensioner only' households where at least one member has reached the age of 75 is £198 million.

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library copies of gender impact assessments which have been undertaken in respect of legislation introduced in this Parliament; if he will make it his policy to do so in respect of future legislation; and if he will make a statement. [47015]

Mr. Tom Clarke: My Department is committed to the mainstreaming initiative launched on 18 May which requires policy initiatives to be assessed for gender impact. We will report progress through the planned cross-Departmental Annual Report to Parliament, to be published after the end of this financial year.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Ukraine

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial assistance is being provided in support of change of use projects in the Ukraine to convert redundant missile facilities into satellite launch pads; if this funding provides for retraining local scientists to be able to undertake this work; and if he will identify the amounts of funding *(a)* arising from bilateral aid, *(b)* arising from EU aid and *(c)* co-ordinated by the EBRD. [44681]

Mr. Fatchett: There are no existing sites in Ukraine suitable for launching satellites. However, we are aware that there have been proposals that Ukrainian ballistic missile manufacturing facilities inherited from the Soviet Union, which have been doing some missile work under contract from Russia, could build launch vehicles for satellites, making use of their considerable expertise in rocket propulsion. HMG have no plans to fund any retraining of local scientists for this purpose and are not aware of EU or EBRD involvement in the venture.

Correspondence

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the volume of correspondence sent to and received from hon. Members by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the periods *(a)* 1 January to 26 March 1994 and *(b)* 1 January to 26 March 1998. [47688]

Mr. Robin Cook: Between 1 January to 26 March 1998, I received 1,329 letters from hon. Members. In the same period, I replied personally to 222 letters from hon. Members.

This reflects the long-standing convention that the Foreign Secretary answers letters from Cabinet (or ex-Cabinet) Ministers, Shadow Cabinet Ministers and Privy Councillors, and replies to some other hon. Members where there is special reason for doing so.

On immigration issues, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State replies to Privy Councillors, and the FCO Correspondence Unit to other hon. Members. On consular issues, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State replies to the majority of letters.

The figures for 1994 are not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49804]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: This department handles its public e-mail via an interactive form on its Web site (www.fco.gov.uk). Messages are acknowledged electronically and then sent to the relevant internal address for appropriate reply.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meet that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49802]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Diplomats

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the relative staffing levels of diplomatic representation abroad as between the UK and *(a)* France, *(b)* Germany and *(c)* Italy. [48206]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* A 1997 European Commission survey of Member States gave numbers of home-based Foreign Ministry staff serving abroad:

	Number
UK	2,400
Italy	2,816
France	6,000
Germany	3,619

Nazi Gold

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the names and addresses of those people who have had their claims honoured following the International Conference on Nazi Gold. [49522]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The aim of the London Conference on Nazi Gold (2 to 4 December 1997) was to establish a sound body of fact on gold looted by the Nazis from both occupied countries and individuals, on which governments and other bodies could base future decisions. It achieved this aim and the full Conference report will be published shortly. The Conference did not set out to establish claims procedures, or to settle individual claims.

Cardiff Summit

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total cost of public events for the Cardiff Summit. [49645]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The only public event at the Cardiff European Council paid for by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was the reception given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for some 250 representatives of the local community, as well as exhibitors and sponsors of the "Wales, the Next Generation" exhibition, in the National Museum of Wales on 14 June. This cost £5,000 (ex VAT). The fireworks display at Cardiff Castle at the end of the dinner given by HM The Queen on 15 June could also be seen by many members of the public in Cardiff. It cost £28,085.11 (ex VAT), and was funded through sponsorship. Some other events were laid on for the public by the local authorities and other local bodies.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total cost to *(a)* the United Kingdom Government and *(b)* the European Union institutions of hosting the European Council in Cardiff, indicating separately the costs of the organisation of (i) the Youth Summit and (ii) other events associated with the Council meeting. [49755]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We are still awaiting final invoices, but expect the cost to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of hosting the European Council in Cardiff to be about £6.6 million (ex VAT). There were also costs arising for the Home Office and the Welsh Office.

The European Union institutions involved in the European Council met the costs of their own staff, senior officials and some office equipment. These costs are not readily available.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave a grant of £2,500 to the British Youth Council who were involved in the organising of the Youth Summit.

I refer the hon. Member to my previous answer today with regard to the costs to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of other events at the European Council meeting.

Mr. Thomas Trafford Ottowell

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the current validity of the claim by the late Mr. Thomas Trafford Ottowell, registered under the Board of Trade No. ED61544, for repayment of unlawful and arbitrary deductions by the German Government from his savings. [49521]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The British Government are not in a position to assess the current validity of this claim which appears to be more a matter for the Austrian or German authorities.

Cuba

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the draft EU-US Understanding on Cuba of 18 May will require EU countries not to encourage investment in property nationalised from Cuban nationals who subsequently acquired US nationality. [50050]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The disciplines on investment in expropriated property agreed as part of the EU/US Understanding signed on 18 May include a denial of government support to new investment in properties expropriated in contravention of international law. Each case would have to be considered on an individual basis. There are no specific provisions concerning properties which belonged to individuals who were Cuban citizens at the time of their expropriation and who subsequently became US citizens.

EU (Television Advertisements)

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many television advertisements have been funded by EU institutions in 1998–99 to date; what has been their nature; what has been the estimated number of viewers in each EU country; and how much they have cost. [49758]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This information is not readily available. We will make inquiries with the institutions concerned and I will write to the hon. Member in due course.

Yugoslavia

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to trace the assets of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under the control of Serbia and to ensure that these are returned on an equitable basis to the successor nations. [50349]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: None. It is for the five successor States to resolve questions of succession to assets and liabilities of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Negotiations continue under the auspices of the High Representatives special negotiator, Sir Arthur Watts, whose fees we cover.

Latin American Students

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his Department's current funded scholarships to Latin American students in British universities. [48630]

Mr. Fatchett: The FCO's Scholarship programme for overseas students comprises the British Chevening Scholarships (in co-operation with the Department for International Development), an annual grant to the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission for Marshall Scholarships, and a contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. The principal objective of our scholarship programme is to win long term friends overseas for Britain. Scholarships are targeted at potential leaders, decision makers and opinion formers in about 150 countries.

In Latin America Chevening scholarships are used to promote our twin objectives in the region of the increased trade and investment and closer political ties, with an increasing emphasis on good government and human rights.

Belarus

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he is making to the Government of Belarus regarding the treatment of diplomatic missions in Minsk. [50423]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the right hon. and learned Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on 1 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 202. Since the recall for consultations to the British Ambassador in Minsk and the return to Minsk of the Belarusian Ambassador in London, the British Charge d'Affaires in Minsk, and the representatives of the missions directly affected by Belarusian action, have continued to make frequent representations to the Belarusian authorities, so far without success. In response to the continued failure of the Belarusian authorities to comply with international law, on 9 July the EU introduced visa restrictions on Belarusian Ministers, Deputy Ministers and senior officials in the Presidential Administration.

Morocco

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Morocco about the fines imposed on Graham Hutt, Serge Dechoz, Kelly Vinikka and Antero Ylikangas, their arrest and interrogation; what discussions he has had with that Government about religious freedom in Morocco; and if he will make a statement. [50166]

Mr. Fatchett: We have provided consular assistance to Dr. Hutt, but we have made no representations to the Moroccan authorities about his case, which is sub judice. He has appealed against his sentence and is free to leave Morocco pending the outcome. The others referred to are not British nationals. We do not have consular responsibility for them in Morocco.

Moroccan law allows personal freedom of religion, as provided for in the Constitution. The Christian church is active in Tangier, Casablanca and Rabat, which has its own Roman Catholic cathedral. As well as the Christian community, Morocco is home to a large Jewish community.

Pakistan

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Pakistan regarding sentences imposed as a result of its blasphemy laws. [50167]

Mr. Fatchett: Our High Commission in Islamabad led an EU demarche to the Pakistan authorities on 14 May about the situation of religious minorities. We made clear the EU's concern about the death penalty imposed on Ayub Masih, a Christian, for blasphemy, and the negative effect such cases can have on inter-faith relations in Pakistan.

I raised the rights of religious minorities with the government of Pakistan during my visit there in June last year, as did my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in January this year.

Human Rights Project Fund

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the projects approved for funding from the Human Rights Project Fund to date and the sums allocated in each case. [49485]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: More than 100 projects totalling over £3.5 million have been approved or approved in principle to date from the Human Rights Project Fund:

Projects approved/approved in principle under the Human Rights Project Fund

Post/department	*Project description*	*Amount (£)*
Accra	Building capacity of NGOs lobbying about the rights of the poor	46,000
Accra	Radio programmes to raise awareness of women's rights	40,000
Addis Ababa	Assistance to Ethiopian human rights conference	46,060
Addis Ababa	Human rights training for regional officials	24,300
Addis Ababa	Support for Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association	23,000
Addis Ababa	Provision of legal books for Federal Supreme Court	10,000
Addis Ababa	Funding for gender and development officer	5,000
African Department (Equatorial)	Support to UN Commission on Arms Flows to Rwanda	50,000
Almaty	Media and governance workshop	28,000
Almaty	Publication of booklets on human rights	15,625
Ankara	Young Lawyer Exchange Scheme	38,300
Ankara	Citizen's Advice Bureau pilot project	27,400
Beijing	Professional ethics seminar for lawyers	90,000
Beijing	Publicity about British policing methods and judicial system	55,000
Beijing	Training video for legal officials	35,000
Beijing	Human rights education project	27,000
Beijing	Support for conference on impact of human rights conventions on national laws	15,000
Beijing	Training for government legal officials	15,000
Belgrade	Assistance with TV documentaries on human rights	30,057
Bogota	Support for rehabilitation of child prostitutes	45,700
Bogota	Training of teachers about detection and prevention of child abuse	18,500
Brasilia	Support to NGO working with street children	23,000
Brasilia	Training for federal government human rights officials	20,000
Brasilia	Support to centre for street children	8,500
Bridgetown	Campaign to raise awareness about violence against women/children	11,000
Budapest	Vocational training for Roma in prison	2,900
Cairo	Support for women's legal aid project	15,600
Caracas	Publication and distribution of report on human rights	12,100
Caracas	Legal entitlement workshops for prisoners	9,200
Castries	Training programme for prison officers	13,500
China Hong Kong Department	Seminar on professional standards in the media	107,639
China Hong Kong Department	Training course on the role of trade unions in a market economy	57,633
Damascus	Human rights scholarships	30,000
Dar es Salaam	Contribution to Arusha peace talks	50,000
Dar es Salaam	Production and distribution of human rights booklets	5,000
Dominica	Prisons and magistrates courts reform project	14,190
Durban	Development of resource materials on women's rights	7,500
Durban	Support for programmes for community conflict management and resolution	7,500
Gaborone	Support for work on administration of justice on violence against women	7,100
Guatemala City	Contribution to Truth Commission	62,000
Harare	Provision of CCTV equipment to victim-friendly court	2,300
Human Rights Policy Department	UNICEF/BBC World Service project on broadcasting to children in armed conflict	100,000

Projects approved/approved in principle under the Human Rights Project Fund

Post/department	*Project description*	*Amount (£)*
Human Rights Policy Department	Attachment of gender mainstreaming officer to OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights	61,000
Human Rights Policy Department	Support for UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women	25,000
Human Rights Policy Department	NGO training seminar on Framework Convention on National Minorities	25,000
Human Rights Policy Department	Support for NGO working group on rights of disabled children	15,000
Human Rights Policy Department	Launch of manual on protecting the rights of street children	5,000
Human Rights Policy Department	Participation in Oxford International Human Rights Course	3,500
Jakarta	Assistance to National Human Rights Commission and Legal Aid Foundation	25,000
Jakarta	EU human rights seminar	22,500
Jerusalem	Palestinian rights programme	348,000
Kampala	Support for Ugandan Human Rights Commission	30,000
Khartoum	Publication and distribution of human rights material	6,500
Kiev	Training seminars and publications on human rights	60,770
Kiev	Support for human rights NGOs	33,400
Kiev	Children's rights awareness project	26,000
Kigali	Assistance to Ministry of Justice in connection with International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda	61,610
Kingston	Support for Jamaica Council for Human Rights	14,500
Kingstown	Equipment for prison workshop	5,500
Kinshasa	Support for Documentation Centre for Legal Studies at Ministry of Justice	53,000
Kuala Lumpur	Participation in Oxford International Human Rights Course	4,000
Kuwait	Human rights seminar	15,000
Latin America Department	Participation by representative of Northern Ireland Office in Peace Conference in Bogota	2,000
Lima	Contribution to Ad Hoc Pardon Commission	78,000

Projects approved/approved in principle under the Human Rights Project Fund

Post/department	*Project description*	*Amount (£)*
Lima	Support for radio programmes on human rights	70,000
Mexico City	Project to promote awareness of women's rights	161,600
Mexico City	Production of TV documentary on children's rights	10,000
Mexico City	Human rights of HIV/AIDS sufferers: education and awareness project	10,000
Moscow	Support for Regional Human Rights Commissioners and NGOs	25,000
Moscow	Support for education initiative by Presidential Commission on Human Rights	25,000
Moscow	Support for regional monitoring of human rights	25,000
Moscow	Youth Human Rights Film Festival	25,000
Moscow	Human rights of HIV/AIDS sufferers: education and awareness project	23,000
Moscow	Development of links between human rights NGOs and the mass media	21,240
Moscow	Project to promote public access to information	18,000
Nairobi	Medical aid to prisoners and torture victims	50,000
Nairobi	Advocacy campaign to promote children's rights	50,000
Nairobi	Support to International Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya Chapter)	20,000
Nairobi	Civic education workshops to promote awareness of role of MPs	17,900
Nairobi	Participation in human rights seminar in Belfast	5,000
New Delhi	Project to raise awareness of human rights in prison management	85,000
New Delhi	Provision of books and information resources to human rights NGOs	50,000
New Delhi	Training and development of counselling skills for legal NGOs	38,000
New Delhi	Human rights training for civil servants	27,500
Phnom Penh	Programme of support for street children	51,160
Phnom Penh	Training for provincial authorities by Cambodian Institute of Human Rights	24,540

Projects approved/approved in principle under the Human Rights Project Fund

Post/department	*Project description*	*Amount (£)*
Port Louis	Media training	8,000
Port Moresby	Establishment of NGO Liaison Office	40,000
Port of Spain	Workshops to raise awareness of domestic violence	5,000
Prague	Education of Roma children	10,000
Pretoria	Participation in Oxford International Human Rights Course	10,000
Pretoria	Strengthening links between African human rights NGOs	10,000
Pretoria	Support for 2nd African Human Rights Conference	9,000
Pretoria	Training for community newspaper reporters	9,000
Pretoria	Media training	6,300
Pretoria	All Africa Human Rights Moot Court Competition	5,000
Quito	Promotion of women's participation in politics	41,513
Sana'a	UK/Yemen criminal justice system initiative	70,000
Santiago	Support for implementation of prison reform	40,000
Santiago	Support for establishment of family and children's courts	35,000
South Asian Department	Joint human rights projects with UK company	50,000
South East Asian Department	UK/Philippines initiative on child welfare	150,000
Ulaanbataar	Training for members of Mongolian prison service	11,000
Vila	Assistance to Vanuatu Ombudsman	7,500

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Council what target she sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to letters from hon. Members. [49880]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Council what is the e-mail address of her Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49882]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: My office's e-mail address is "ecrooks@cabinetoffice.gsi.net".

Drug Action Teams

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the President of the Council (1) if she will make a statement about future funding to secure the continued existence of drug action teams; [50336]

(2) if she will take into account the specific nature of drug issues in rural areas when future funding for drug action teams is determined. [50337]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Decisions on resourcing for anti-drugs programmes will be announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper. Further details will be released in announcements at a later date.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Attorney-General what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49838]

The Attorney-General: The target set for the maximum time in which letters are responded to is 15 working days. During the year 1997/98, the latest period for which figures are available, 88% of letters were answered within that target. The average time taken to respond to letters from an hon. Member was 13 days.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Attorney-General what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49840]

The Attorney-General: Although my Department does not have a separate Ministerial Correspondence Unit the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers has the following e-mail address:

lslo@gtnet.gov.uk

Counsel's Fees

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General if he will publish the current year's budget for the Crown Prosecution Service together with his estimate of the amount to be spent on counsel's fees. [49213]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service's gross provision for 1998–99 totals £302,737,000. At this stage I estimate that the Department will spend £86,000,000 on counsel's fees. Expenditure on council's fees will be monitored throughout the year to refine the forecast outturn and an additional Supply provision will, if necessary, be sought.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General what budgetary controls are exercised in the expenditure of public funds in payment of counsel's fees in work done by the Serious Fraud Office. [49216]

The Attorney-General: In SFO cases the normal procedure is to ask 3 counsel to tender for the work. Hourly rates for preparatory work and a daily rate for court attendance are then agreed in advance. The number of hours spent in preparation is agreed with the lawyer in charge of the case and is an integral part of the SFO budgeting arrangements. It should be noted that the fee levels will not necessarily be the deciding factor but rather one of the factors in the choice of counsel.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list the total budget for the Crown Prosecution Service for each of the last three years together with the amount spent on counsel's fees. [49212]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service's total provision for each of the last three years together with the amount spent on counsel's fees were as follows:

£

Year	*Provision*	*Counsel fee expenditure*
1997–98	320,752,000	85,134,613
1996–97	320,307,000	82,699,317
1995–96	315,817,000	73,884,561

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list the total budget for the Serious Fraud Office for each of the last three years and the amount of each of those budgets that was spent on counsel's fees. [49215]

The Attorney-General: The SFO (net of Appropriations in Aid) budget and expenditure on counsel's fees for each of the last three years are as follows:

£

Year	*Provision*	*Counsel fees*
1995–96	17,376,000	3,245,642.57
1996–97	16,988,000	3,091,045.09
1997–98[1]	16,317,000	[2]2,574,842.03

[1] This year's account has yet to be audited and the figure is subject to change

[2] The fees paid to counsel excludes VAT which is to be recovered for the first time by the Serious Fraud Office

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General what criteria are applied in agreeing fees with counsel's clerks. [49214]

The Attorney-General: Fees are determined by the Crown Prosecution Service either by reference to the rates and guidance set out in the CPS Fee Scheme, or in exceptional cases, negotiated individually. The CPS Fee Scheme is agreed annually with the Legal Aid and Fees Committee of the Bar Council.

When agreeing fees in individual cases, the Crown Prosecution Service has regard to any unusual weight, gravity or complexity of the issues, and to the skill, standing, seniority or expertise of counsel appropriate to the case. The fee determined reflects the time actually and justifiably spent by counsel in both preparing and presenting the case for hearing, and provides fair and reasonable remuneration for the work done.

The Serious Fraud Office apply a different procedure, having regard to the complexity and weight of the work undertaken. It is described in my answer today to Question No. 49216, *Official Report*, column *39*.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Attorney-General, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *564*, what was the expenditure in 1996–97 on counsel's fees by *(a)* the Department of Trade and Industry and *(b)* HM Customs and Excise. [49217]

The Attorney-General: Having regard to the context of my hon. Friend's question, I have taken it to refer only to fees paid to prosecuting counsel. The expenditure by the Department of Trade and Industry in 1996–97 on counsel's fees for prosecution work was £824,540.10 (inclusive of VAT).

The total fees paid by Customs and Excise to prosecution counsel in the same period was £7,141,612 (inclusive of VAT).

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Training Allowance

Mr. Love: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the provision of allowances for hon. Members to undertake training to assist in the fulfilment of their duties. [49688]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: There is no allowance specifically for Members' training.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Bloody Sunday Inquiry

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent representations she has received concerning the legal representation of witnesses at the Bloody Sunday inquiry; and if she will make a statement. [49722]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have received two letters from a representative of Madden and Finucane (Solicitors) and my officials have met a delegation from the Irish Government to listen to concerns. The level of legal representation is a matter for the Inquiry being conducted by Lord Saville and his team.

"Partnership for Equality"

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many of the replies she received to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" and what percentage of the total expressed opposition to the proposals with particular reference to the proposed establishment of a single commission dealing with all equality issues; and if she will list the groups expressing opposition. [48372]

Mr. Worthington: Written comments on the consultative elements of the White Paper were to be sent by 12 June 1998 and by that date we had received 114 replies, as indicated in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on 17 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *254*. A further 9 responses were subsequently received and a total of 123 were considered. Of those expressing a view on the proposed establishment of a single Commission 55 or 45 per cent. were broadly against. These were:

Barnados
Belfast and District Trade Union Council
Belfast Travellers Education Development Group
Commission on the Administration of Justice
Chinese Welfare Association NI
Commission for Racial Equality (NI)
Craigavon Standing Conference of Women's Organisations
Craigavon Travellers Support Committee
Derry City Council
Disability Action
Equal Opportunities Commission (N)
Falls Women's Centre (two responses)
Fee Ching Leong
Forum for Community Work Education NI
Foyle Friend
Greater Belfast Community Network
Institute for Public Policy Research
Jones and Cassidy, Solicitors
Law Centre NI
Mrs. K. M. I. Wilson OBE
Multi Cultural Resource Centre
NI Disability Council
NI Forum of People with Disabilities
NI Union of Supported Employment
NI Anti-Poverty Network
Northern Ireland Committee—Irish Congress of Trade Unions
NI Council for Ethnic Equality
NI Council for Ethnic Minorities
NI Public Service Alliance
North West Community Network
NI Voluntary Trust
NI Women's Coalition
Opportunities for Women in Learning
Payee Point Travellers Centre
POBAL (Irish Language Group)
Resource and Development Agency
Roden Street Community Development Group
Rural Community Network
SACHR
SDLP
Sinn Fein
Soroptimist International
Soroptimist International (UK Programme Action Committee)
Southern Travellers Early Years Partnership
Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group
The Rainbow
The Women's Centre
Training for Women Network
Traveller Movement NI
UNISON
Women's Forum NI
Women into Politics
Women's National Commission
Women's Support Network.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the responses to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" will be made public. [48373]

Mr. Worthington: The Government do not intend to publish the responses but arrangements have been made for copies of the replies, with the exception of one requesting confidentiality, to be placed in the Parliamentary Libraries.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what changes to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" are being made as a result of responses received to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality". [48374]

Mr. Worthington: I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *665–66*.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will allow interested parties to make changes to their submissions to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" to take account of the publication of the Belfast Agreement. [48375]

Mr. Worthington: No. All but two of the 123 submissions on the White Paper were received after the Belfast Agreement was published and almost all respondents were therefore able to take the Agreement into account.

Equality Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what reduction in costs and manpower she estimates will occur as a result of the proposed establishment of a single Equality Commission. [48376]

Mr. Worthington: The proposal to establish a single Equality Commission was not based on seeking a reduction in costs and manpower. A new Commission would take on roles additional to those currently exercised by the Fair Employment Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland, the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Disability Council. These new roles include responsibilities in relation to the statutory obligation on the public sector to promote equality of opportunity, changes to Fair Employment law proposed in the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" including the outlawing of discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services and functions comparable to those proposed for a Disability Rights Commission in Great Britain. No estimate of the costs and staffing of such a body has yet been made.

Suicides

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received concerning recent trends in the rate of suicide; and what measures she intends to take. [48378]

Mr. Worthington: Representations have been received from one local councillor and from the Coroner for Greater Belfast. I am shortly to meet the Coroner to hear his assessment of recent trends in the rate of suicides, particularly in relation to young people. Additionally, a number of practical steps are being taken by the Department of Health and Social Services and by local health and social services boards and trusts to identify the possible root causes of suicides and prevent further tragic loss of life.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49837]

Mr. Hoon: The Unit's e-mail address is:

mcu.lcd@gtnet.gov.uk.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what target he sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49835]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given him today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service *Official Report*, column *1*.

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the total cost to his Department of *(a)* considering and *(b)* processing successful applications for silk in 1998. [49267]

Mr. Hoon: The departmental expenditure apportionable to the procedure for considering applications for Queen's Counsel in 1998 is estimated to be £117,236. This comprises £65,975 for direct staff costs and £51,261 for indirect costs, such as a share of the costs of common services. The cost of processing successful applications (that is, the cost of granting silk to successful applicants) in 1998 was approximately £9,000, which was recovered through a fee paid by new Queen's Counsel.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what fee his Department would have needed to charge each applicant in 1998 to cover the cost of processing applications for silk. [49268]

Mr. Hoon: The Department would have needed to charge applicants a fee of £230 to enable the estimated departmental expenditure apportionable to the procedure for considering applicants for Queen's Counsel in 1998 to be fully recovered. The cost of granting silk to successful applicants is covered by the fee of £150 payable by new Queen's Counsel.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Oil Over-capacity

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the problems of physical storage capacity world-wide associated with the world-wide over-capacity in the production of oil. [48631]

Mr. Battle: Assessments of current surplus storage capacity are difficult to make due to a lack of complete information on the current levels of stocks. However, it is clear that global inventories are currently high. In their latest *Monthly Oil Market Report*, the International Energy Agency estimates that, for April 1998 (the latest month for which accurate data are available), total OECD industry and Government-controlled stocks of crude oil and products stood at 3,733 million barrels, 101 million barrels higher than at the same time last year.

Football Hooligans

Mr. Loughton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received from employers on the taking of further measures against people who have been convicted of offences during the World Cup while in France, on their return to the United Kingdom. [48400]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My Department has received one letter.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has for encouraging the development of energy from waste technology. [49677]

Mr. Battle: To date, well over 200 schemes, with a total capacity exceeding 1,000MW, have been offered contracts under the first four rounds of the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO-1 to NFFO-4) to generate power via waste-based technologies from sources including landfill gas, sewage gas, and municipal and industrial waste.

In the short-term future, I expect to announce the fifth round of the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO-5) in the autumn. Subject to suitable bids being received, I am considering including three separate bands in the NFFO-5 Order for waste-based technologies—for landfill gas, for municipal and industrial waste, and for municipal and industrial waste using combined heat and power (CHP)—as well as separate bands for small-scale hydro and onshore wind energy.

In the longer term, and in line with this Government's manifesto commitment to undertake a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources, I have been reviewing policy towards new and renewable energy, including considerations of what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10% of UK electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010 and how renewables can make an effective contribution to meeting requirements for future greenhouse gas reduction commitments. Further support for energy from waste technology is being considered as part of that review process. I hope to announce the outcome of that review this summer.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the EU White Paper on renewable energy. [49676]

Mr. Battle: We have given the White Paper careful consideration, along with our European partners. Under the UK Presidency, the Council of Ministers adopted a Resolution welcoming the White Paper and urging Member States to develop strategies to promote renewables in order to bring about a substantial increase in renewables throughout the EU.

In line with this Government's manifesto commitment to undertake a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources, I have been reviewing policy towards new and renewable energy, including considerations of what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10% of UK electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010, and how renewables can make an effective contribution to meeting requirements for future greenhouse gas reduction commitments.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans her Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49884]

Mrs. Beckett: The core Department has had facilities in place for some time to allow all staff to correspond electronically with any individual or organisation able to exchange E-mail via public networks such as the internet. The Department's Agencies have, or plan to have, similar facilities.

E-mail addresses are included in the Department's letterhead and, additionally, will be published for key contacts. The Department is also connected to the Government Secure Intranet and able to correspond electronically with an increasing number of public sector organisations via that network.

In line with the Government's target that:

"25% of Government transactions should be capable of being handled electronically by 2002",

we have active programmes of our own aimed at ensuring these facilities are used to best effect, and we are also involved in central initiatives to develop and extend the concept of 'Joined-Up' Government for wider business benefit.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the e-mail address of her Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49885]

Mrs. Beckett: My Department does not have a central Ministerial Correspondence Unit. Each Minister's Private Office handles its own correspondence. The relevant e-mail addresses are:

beckett.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

battle.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

clinton-davis.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

griffiths.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

mccartney.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

roche.tlo@tli.dti.gov.uk

simon.tlo@tlo.dti.gov.uk

Joint Research Equipment Initiative

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much public money has been allocated to date to the Joint Research Equipment Initiative; how much more will be allocated; and what is the planned limit for public contributions. [49946]

Mr. Battle: In 1996, the first year of the Joint Research Equipment Initiative, £25 million of public money was allocated to the scheme. In 1997, this figure rose to £35 million. The amount of public money allocated to date for 1998 is £25 million.

Future public contributions are dependent on allocations from the Science Budget and DfEE.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to announce the results of the third round of the Joint Research Equipment Initiative. [49945]

Mr. Battle: As stated in the JREI rules, which were available from the Higher Education funding councils' web sites until the closure of the competition on 31 May 1998, it is expected that the results of the third round will be announced by the end of January 1999.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many bids have been received for the third round of the Joint Research Equipment Initiative. [49944]

Mr. Battle: Applications are still being checked for eligibility, but initial indications are that some 400 applications have been received for JREI 98.

Export Licence Applications

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of applications for export licences were processed by her Department within 20 days for the period 1 May 1997 to date. [48227]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* The Export Control Organisation (ECO) of DTI measures its performance against two aims:

- to provide a substantive response to an application within 20 working days of receipt for applications that need to be circulated to other Government Departments according to their policy requirements ('circulated' cases);
- to provide such a response within 10 working days of receipt for applications that are dealt with by DTI itself ('non-circulated' cases).

In each case, full documentation in support of the application must be provided by the applicant at the outset for these targets to apply.

ECO management data on the processing of licence applications are compiled on the basis of four-week periods. The accumulated data for the period beginning nearest to 1 May 1997 are for the period 3 May 1997 to 30 May 1997. The latest period for which management data are available is the period 2 May 1998 to 29 May 1998.

To the nearest percentage point, 51 per cent. of circulated cases during the period were finalised within 20 working days.

This information was taken from the Export Control Organisation's management data, which are compiled in order to monitor performance at processing applications

for Standard Individual Export Licences. The performance measures do not apply to applications for Open Individual Export Licences (due to the very wide variations between goods and country coverage of such licences), to licences covering Iran or Iraq or to exports which are subject to control solely because of United Nations Sanctions.

Science and Engineering

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement about the future of the science and engineering base. [50611]

Mrs. Beckett: As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review I am able to announce a £1.1 billion additional investment. This will transform the Science and Engineering Base, modernise the UK's research performance, respond to the Dearing Committee's concerns about research infrastructure in universities, and help boost economic growth. It reverses the decline under the previous Government and is made possible by a path-breaking public private partnership with the Wellcome Trust. Up to 2002, the package includes:

- A £600 million fund for building new and refurbishing existing university laboratories, equipment and other essential infrastructural needs as identified in the Dearing Report, funded equally by my Department and the Wellcome Trust;
- £400 million for the Research Councils to meet the current and capital costs of new project funding in priority areas like life sciences;
- £100 million from the Wellcome Trust towards a new high intensity synchrotron X-ray machine which will help keep the UK at the forefront of research on the exploitation of the human genome;
- new arrangements to ensure that the Funding Councils and the Research Councils work closely together to deliver better value for money and transparency in the use of research funds.

The UK's output of world class scientists and cutting-edge discoveries is second to none—and a guarantee of our economic prosperity and quality of life in the 21st Century. Our greatest asset is our scientists, but they need funding for their research and tools to do it with. Years of under-investment in laboratories and equipment—and in the people themselves—have jeopardised this inheritance. This major injection of funds reverses this decline that our predecessors allowed, ensuring that we have a modern and effective science base for the new millennium—particularly in the life sciences where the UK is a world leader.

I am particularly grateful to the Wellcome Trust—the major charitable funder of scientific research in the UK—for the generous offer which has resulted in this pioneering partnership.

Science provision settlement

	1998–99	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Total*
Cash baseline[1] (£ million)	1,349	1,349	1,349	1,349	—
Additional programmes (£ million)	—	61	150	196	407
Infrastructure fund (£ million)	—	75	100	125	300
Total additions (£ million)	—	136	250	321	707
Total new science provision[1]	1,349	1,485	1,599	1,670	—
Percentage increase in cash terms over 1998–99 baseline	—	10.1	18.5	23.8	—
Percentage increase in real terms over 1998–99 baseline	—	7.3	12.7	14.8	—
The science budget net of these receipts is:					
Total new science budget (£ million)	1,338	1,474	1,588	1,659	—

[1] The CSR Settlement is for gross science provision which includes £11 million for EU receipts

In addition, the Wellcome Trust are providing:

	£ million
Contribution to infrastructure Fund	300
Contribution to X-ray source	100
Total Wellcome Trust Contribution	400

Total additional funding:

	£ million
Science Budget	707
Wellcome Trust	400
Total	1,107

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what efforts she is making to raise awareness of environmental and sustainable issues within her Department; and if specific training will be made available to staff where appropriate. [50059]

Mr. Battle: Like all my ministerial colleagues, I am clear about the important role that the Government's commitment to the objective of sustainable development must play in DTI's work. A range of actions has been taken to ensure that this is backed up throughout the Department, and more will be developed. This includes: circulation of copies of the recently published detailed advice on environmental appraisal to all directors and to staff at all levels, to be supported by staff training sessions; a series of seminars with prominent speakers from industry and NGOs to raise the level of understanding of sustainable development issues and the implications for our work; a Sustainable Development network throughout DTI and Government Offices to provide a focal point for two-way communication with the 50-strong Environment Directorate which provides a central contact point for advice and information to all staff on environmental issues; and a revised Green Housekeeping Guide which has recently been issued to all staff, as well as being made available on the Department's intranet, with the aim of both further increasing staff awareness of environmental issues and encouraging staff action that helps to ensure continuous improvement in the

Department's environmental performance. Alongside the DTI's contribution to the revision of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, work is also underway on the development of a DTI sustainable development strategy. The DTI strategy will encompass all DTI policies and operations, including training to ensure effective implementation.

Part-time Work Directive

Miss McIntosh: To ask the President the Board of Trade when she estimates the Part-time Work Directive will take effect in the UK. [49869]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Part-time Work Directive was extended to the UK on 7 April with two years for implementation. It will therefore take effect in the UK by April 2000. We intend to consult widely on the best way to implement the Directive.

Textiles Industry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what assessment her Department has made of the Commission's calculations relating to the need for EU anti-dumping tariffs on unfinished textiles; [49629]

(2) what assessment she has made of the impact of the imposition of the anti-dumping tariffs on unfinished textiles on imports of grey cloth from *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Germany; [49624]

(3) what estimate she has made of the impact on employment levels in the United Kingdom textile finishing industry of the EU's imposition of anti-dumping duties on finished textiles; [49620]

(4) what assessment she has made of the effects on the prices and output of finished textiles as a result of the EU anti-dumping tariff on unfinished textiles. [49623]

Mrs. Roche: The European Commission has imposed provisional anti-dumping duties on imports of most unbleached cotton fabrics from China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey for a period of six months from 8 April 1998 because, in its judgment, such imports were being dumped and causing injury to Community weavers and the Community interest calls for intervention to prevent such injury.

We, with a clear majority of Member States, advised strongly against this action.

In our judgment, any injury to EU weavers has resulted predominantly from increased imports from countries outside the EU that are not covered by the anti-dumping investigation and that are not subject to the provisional anti-dumping duties. Any benefit to EU weavers from any reduction in imports from countries that are subject to those duties and resulting from those duties is therefore likely to be temporary.

On the other hand, the imposition of anti-dumping duties, particularly if they are made definitive and remain in place for five years, is likely to result in some increase in the price of unbleached cotton fabrics, to the detriment of EU users of such cloth and, ultimately, of EU consumers. Moreover, manufacturers in the countries that are subject to those duties are thereby given a clear commercial incentive to bleach, print or dye, and, perhaps, make up their cloth before export, to the detriment of the corresponding EU industries.

The likely overall effect is a reduction in production and employment in the EU textile industry.

While the likely direction of these effects is clear, reliable estimates of their scale cannot readily be made.

UK imports of unbleached cotton fabrics from Germany are modest, and unlikely to be greatly affected by the imposition of anti-dumping duties on the import into the EU of such cloth from certain countries outside the EU.

The Government will, for those reasons, vigorously oppose the imposition of definitive anti-dumping duties on unbleached cotton fabrics should the European Commission make such a proposal to the Council of Ministers.

Casting Industry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the impact of *(a)* the imposition of and *(b)* the recent removal of EU anti-dumping duties on pig-iron on the British casting industry. [49627]

Mrs. Roche: The European Commission introduced anti-dumping measures on imports into the EU of hematite pig-iron from Brazil, Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine from January 1994, and on such imports from the Czech Republic from January 1996.

We advised strongly against such action primarily because we were not satisfied that imports from those countries were the cause of any injury to EU producers of hematite pig-iron and because of the likely detriment to users of that pig-iron in the EU, the foundry industry.

The European Commission's subsequent review of those measures, in essence, confirmed that our concerns were well founded. We therefore welcome the European Commission's repeal of those measures from 9 May 1998. This is likely to benefit the foundry industry in the UK and the rest of the EU.

Planning (Overhead Lines)

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to review the Overhead Lines (Exemptions) Regulations 1990 and their interrelationship with normal planning regulations. [49745]

Mr. Battle: My right hon. Friend has no such plans.

Nuclear Industry

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many reports on the nuclear industry are currently being withheld for reasons of commercial confidentiality under section 28b of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974; and if she will list their titles. [49475]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today, in answers from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), *Official Report*, column *19*.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Alcohol Sales (Young People)

22. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the purchase of alcohol by persons under 18 years old. [48416]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received representations about preventing adults from buying alcohol on behalf of children, increasing the use of test purchases and closing the loophole affecting sales by company employees.

Isle of Man and Channel Islands

23. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's handling of relations with the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. [48418]

Mr. George Howarth: My right hon. Friend is the Privy Councillor with special responsibility for the Islands, and the Constitutional Unit of the Home Office is the formal point of communication between the United Kingdom and the Island authorities.

Neighbourhood Nuisance

24. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his time scale for the introduction of new legislation to deal with neighbourhood nuisance. [48420]

Mr. Michael: We plan to implement the anti-social behaviour order provisions of the Crime and Disorder Bill with effect from 1 April 1999. We expect to implement the Bill's provisions for local crime and disorder reduction partnerships in September, so that the first crime and disorder audits can take place this autumn, to allow strategies to tackle locally identified problems to be in place by 1 April 1999. Youth Justice and other provisions of the Bill will also be implemented from this autumn onwards.

Immigrants (Detention)

25. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the review of immigration detention procedures to be complete. [48421]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The review is largely complete. I expect to announce our approach to detention in the proposed Immigration and Asylum White Paper.

Illegal Immigration

26. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the extent to which illegal immigration into this country is by way of other member countries of the European Union. [48422]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Significant numbers of illegal immigrants enter the United Kingdom from neighbouring continental countries within the European Union. We have been handicapped in returning many of them by the provisions of the Dublin Convention signed up to by the previous Government.

Paedophile Activity

27. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effects of his initiatives to reduce paedophile activity. [48423]

Ms Quin: There has been a significant change of approach since we implemented the Sex Offenders Act 1997 last September, with the police and probation services actively co-operating over public protection.

New measures in the Crime and Disorder Bill, in particular the Sex Offender Order and the extended supervision of sex offenders, will help protect the public still further from the risk of known sex offenders re-offending.

Prisons (Population)

28. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the current number of inmates in Her Majesty's prisons and the forecast change over the next 12 months. [48425]

Ms Quin: The current prison population is 65,754. If trends which have been observed in recent years continue, the total prison population is expected to average 65,700 during 1999, once the effect of Home Detention Curfew has been taken into account. Home Detention Curfew, as provided for in the Crime and Disorder Bill [*Lords*], is expected to reduce the prison population by around 3,000 to 4,000 below where it would otherwise be. On this basis, the prison population is expected to be 64,500 at the end of June 1999.

Young Offender Institutions

29. **Mr. Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the contents of current regimes in young offender institutions. [48426]

Ms Quin: In line with recommendations made by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons in his Thematic Review of young prisoners, a significant programme is underway to review and improve arrangements for holding young offenders within the Prison Service.

Improved regimes are being developed in four Young Offender Institutions: Huntercombe, Werrington, Swinfen Hall and Onley. £2 million has been made available to allow for an increase in hours spent in purposeful activity; an improvement in education, work, offending behaviour programmes and Physical Education; and development of throughcare and resettlement. The results of this project will be assessed by comparing the progress of young prisoners in these establishments with those in a control group.

As part of the Government's New Deal, "Welfare to Work" gateway courses are being trialed in 11 establishments. Seven of these establishments are Young Offender Institutions and two hold young offenders as well as adult prisoners. This scheme will benefit 18 to 24-year-old prisoners by improving their chances of finding employment after release, and therefore should assist the resettlement process.

The results from both projects will inform the development of regimes in other young offender in other young offender institutions.

Police (Lancashire)

30. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the number of beat policemen in Lancashire. [48427]

Mr. Michael: The Lancashire Police Authority made representations about the funding settlement for 1998–99, but it expressed no particular concern about the number of police officers on the beat. The previous Government's Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 gave chief constables the responsibility to determine the number of officers in each force within available resources.

Provisional police manpower figures for March 1998 show that the number of constables in Lancashire increased by 12 over the previous 12 months to 2,504, and that there was an overall increase in police numbers of ten to 3,257. The Lancashire Police Authority will have a spending capacity for 1998–99 of £177 million. This is an increase of 3.8 per cent. or £6.4 million over 1997–98.

Alcohol (Young People)

31. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning links between under-age drinking and violent and loutish behaviour in town centres. [48428]

Mr. Michael: The public, police officers and local councillors have all indicated that alcohol-related crime and disorder, including that involving underage drinkers, is a significant problem. We have implemented the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997 and will be legislating to clarify the law relating to adults buying alcohol for children and the use of children in test purchases. The Anti-Social Behaviour Order and other provisions in the Crime and Disorder Bill will also help with specific local problems.

It will be for the police and local authorities, with their partners, to assess the extent of such problems locally as part of the crime and disorder audit required under the Crime and Disorder Bill and to develop strategies to reduce violence and bad behaviour, including steps to deal with under-age drinking where necessary.

Police (Disciplinary Procedures)

32. **Ms Beverley Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had about reforming police disciplinary procedures; and when he proposes to implement changes. [48429]

Mr. Michael: I have regular discussions with the police staff associations and other interested parties. As my right hon. Friend announced to the House on 23 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns *21–24*, new police discipline procedures will come into effect on 1 April 1999.

Fire and Police Service Pensions

33. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reform fire and police pension arrangements. [48430]

Mr. Michael: Consultation documents on the police and fire service pension schemes were published on 31 March of this year. We have invited comments by 31 July on the issues raised in the documents. We will take careful account of the comments we receive when we come to consider any changes to the pension arrangements for new entrants to the police and fire services and to medical retirement procedures.

Police (Performance)

34. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what mechanisms he compares the performance of different police forces. [48431]

Mr. Michael: The Home Secretary sets out his strategic development priorities (key objectives) for the police and the performance of different police forces is compared on the basis of their effectiveness in working towards these objectives and the other measures of effectiveness studied by the Inspectorate and the Audit Commission. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has a statutory duty under the Police Act 1996 to inspect and report to the Secretary of State on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales. In so doing, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) takes into account the performance of forces against the key policing objectives and performance indicators set by the Home Secretary, as well as against a wider range of performance indicators and criteria. HMIC also carries out thematic inspections on specific issues of public interest. Comparison of performance between forces is assisted by HMIC's model of Most Similar Force Analysis, which groups together forces with similar characteristics.

The Audit Commission is required under the Local Government Act 1992 to collect data from police authorities which will allow comparison between different areas. The data are incorporated in the HMIC reporting process, and published separately by the Audit Commission on an annual basis.

Prisons (Suicides)

35. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what studies he has evaluated on the suicide rates in Her Majesty's prisons. [48432]

Ms Quin: Statistics on the number of self-inflicted deaths are collected and published each year in the Prison Service's Annual Report. The Prison Service examines each death in prison custody thoroughly to see whether any lessons can be learned and, where apparent clusters of deaths occur, considers whether there are any common factors. Research has identified that the first month of imprisonment (whether as a sentenced or remand prisoner) is a period of significantly increased risk of suicide. This particularly affects local prisons with a high proportion of remand prisoners.

The Prison Service is also conducting research into suicide and self-injury to improve the understanding of self-injury and its relationship with suicidal behaviour. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons is also preparing a thematic report on suicides and self harm in prisons.

Prisons (Hepatitis)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce levels of hepatitis in prisons. [48401]

Ms Quin: The Prison Service runs an extensive education and counselling programme to make prisoners aware of the risks to health from communicable diseases and offers prisoners and staff who come into contact with them immunisation against hepatitis B. As part of efforts to reduce hepatitis and HIV, it is also piloting the reintroduction of disinfecting tablets in selected establishments from this month, as announced by my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton East, (Mr. Howarth) the Under-Secretary of State.

Probation Service

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage offender behaviour programmes run by the probation service. [48407]

Ms Quin: We have just issued guidance to all probation services on this subject. The guidance sets out a detailed programme of action intended to ensure real progress towards the goal that all offenders are supervised in ways which have been shown to be effective in reducing reoffending. This initiative (which has the full backing of the Association of Chief Officers of Probation) includes the development and piloting of new evidence-based supervision programmes and a new system for their independent accreditation.

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to encourage offender behaviour programmes run by the Probation Service. [48399]

Ms Quin: We have just issued guidance to all probation services on this subject. The guidance sets out a detailed programme of action intended to ensure real progress towards the goal that all offenders are supervised in ways which have been shown to be effective in reducing reoffending. This initiative (which has the full backing of the Association of Chief Officers of Probation) includes the development and piloting of new evidence-based supervision programmes and a new system for their independent accreditation.

Prisons (Drug Use)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the results of random drug tests in prisons. [48410]

Mr. George Howarth: There has been a reduction in the percentage of random mandatory drug test samples testing positive for drugs, from 24.4 per cent. in 1996/97 to 20.8 per cent. in 1997/98. This reduction is a welcome indication of the Prison Service's success in reducing the level of drug misuse in prisons.

Supervision of Offenders

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on arrangements for the post-release supervision of offenders who have been convicted abroad and have been released back to the United Kingdom. [48414]

Ms Quin: Offenders who have completed prison sentences abroad before returning to the United Kingdom are not subject to any compulsory supervision. We are concerned about risks to the public by certain offenders who have committed serious crimes and who are deported to this country, and are considering legislative options to address the issue. This will be done in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices.

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to continue to authorise the use of conductive loop tags. [49642]

Ms Quin: Any electronic monitoring equipment used in the new electronic monitoring services in England and Wales will need to satisfy the technical criteria specified by the Home Office prior to its authorisation for use.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of the companies shortlisted for the national roll of tagging *(a)* use and *(b)* propose to use equipment supplied by Bolder Industries of America. [49641]

Ms Quin: No equipment supplied by Bolder Industries is currently used in the existing trials of electronic monitoring. Shortlisted bidders for the national electronic monitoring service are required to propose the equipment they intend to use in their bids, which are due today.

Football Arrests

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people from the United Kingdom have been arrested before and during football matches involving teams from England and Scotland played in the World Cup in France. [49567]

Mr. Michael: The information is not available in precisely the form requested. The information presently available indicates that 286 English and Scottish people were arrested in France during the World Cup Finals (up to 30 June), 275 of whom were English and 11 Scottish. Fourteen English people were deported or expelled from France, and 363 were refused leave to enter.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what sources of information are used in the preparation of the country assessment for Sri Lanka by the Information and Policy Unit of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, with particular reference to those relating to the human rights situation of the Tamil community; how often that assessment is reviewed; and if he will make a statement. [49686]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on 13 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns *127–28*. The Sri Lanka country assessment is fully sourced and draws on information contained in reports produced by Amnesty International, Human

Rights Watch Asia, United Nations High Commission for Refugees Centre for Documentation and Research, as well as the United States' Department reports on Human Rights Practices in Sri Lanka. Details of these sources of information are contained in the bibliography which accompanies the assessment.

It is intended to revise and update the assessment regularly at about six monthly intervals.

Prisoners (Communicable Diseases)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *587–88*, in respect of plans to reduce the risk of the spread of communicable diseases in prisons, if he will outline the criteria that the independent academic team based at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine will use to evaluate the success of the initiative; and if he will list the prisons in which the pilot scheme will take place. [49488]

Mr. George Howarth: The purpose of the pilot scheme is to trial a variety of distribution methods for disinfecting tablets. The evaluation by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine will take account of:

take-up rate of the tablets;

the working of the various methods for distribution of the tablets, including whether or not they ensure anonymity;

any obstacles to implementation; and

any evidence of intended and unintended effects on existing regimes.

The following establishments are taking part in the pilot scheme: Askham Grange; Coldingley: Cookham Wood; Garth; Highdown; Holloway; Long Lartin; Norwich; Stoke Heath; Welstun; and Woodhill.

Prisons (Closed Visits)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many closed visits have taken place in prisons in England and Wales during the last 12 months. [49478]

Ms Quin: Governors have discretion under Prison Standing Order 5 to impose closed visits on any prisoner where security or control considerations so require. The decision to impose closed visits on a prisoner is taken on the basis of information available in each case and is kept under review. Figures for the number of prisoners subject at any one time to closed visits and the number of visits held under closed conditions are not held centrally.

CS Sprays

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have been prosecuted for misuse of CS sprays since January 1996. [49492]

Mr. Michael: This information is not available centrally. Of all the complaints investigated by the Police Complaints Authority from 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1998, there were two cases in which police officers were prosecuted for misuse of CS. In both cases the officers were found not guilty.

Vehicles (Spray Suppression)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been prosecuted for driving a vehicle whose spray suppression devices have failed to comply with Regulation 65 of the Road Vehicle (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 *(a)* from April 1987 to March 1992 and *(b)* since April 1992. [47765]

Mr. Michael: Prosecutions for this offence cannot be distinguished from other similar offences connected with defective vehicles in the statistics collected centrally.

Most offences of this nature are dealt with by the issue of a prohibition notice, but figures kept by the Vehicle Inspectorate (an executive agency of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) do not separately distinguish offences of defective spray suppression devices from offences connected with defective wings and wheel arches.

The Government recognise the importance of this issue and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), has outlined the steps being taken in the United Kingdom and Europe to improve the standards of spray suppression.

The Home Office is co-operating with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on a variety of issues and this issue will be included in future discussions between Ministers.

Security Service Files

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of security service files which are no longer required to be held for operational purposes; [50390]

(2) pursuant to his oral statement of 25 February 1998, *Official Report*, column 346, how and when he proposes to carry out his undertaking concerning security service files. [50353]

Mr. Michael: During the debate on 25 February, my right hon. Friend undertook to make a statement on Security Service files before the summer recess. That remains his intention.

Police Communications

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what support his Department is giving in order to improve police communications systems. [48417]

Mr. Michael: The Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP) is intended to replace all radio infrastructures for the police service with the new generation of digital radio communication systems from 1999 onwards. The project is being managed by the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO), which became a Non-Department Public Body in April this year. Under the PSRCP, a national co-ordinated approach is being taken to the planning, design and implementation of the new communications systems, and PITO has been supporting all police forces in England and Wales to achieve this. This next generation of communications systems will utilise new radio spectrum we have secured for the service which will overcome many of the current

operational difficulties, including radio interference within existing bands. A Business Case for the implementation of the project will be completed this year, and a decision taken on whether to proceed.

PITO is also responsible for managing the contract for the Police National Network (PNN), the police service's own national data and telephony communications network. The Organisation is in the process of procuring a second generation PNN which will be available by summer 1999. The new service will build on the success of the existing network and will offer the next generation of telecommunications infrastructure for policing, criminal justice and public safety throughout the United Kingdom. It is envisaged that it will offer the latest intranet features and will incorporate the Emergency Communications Network.

Mental Ill Offenders

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 16 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *326*, what progress has been made on improving the level of information provided to the victims of crimes committed by people with mental disorders. [49266]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 29 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *18*.

Cannabis

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many licences he has issued for cannabis to be grown, processed or supplied for medical research; when they were issued; and if he will make a statement. [49721]

Mr. George Howarth: Records show that two licences have been issued for cannabis to be grown, processed or supplied for medical research. The first was issued in 1982 and the second in 1998.

Prisoners (Education)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evidence he has obtained as to the proportion of the prison population who are deficient in *(a)* literacy and *(b)* numeracy; and if he will make a statement on the provision of education in prison with respect to these problems for *(a)* adults and *(b)* young offenders. [50112]

Ms Quin: The Prison Service derives its knowledge about literacy and numeracy rates from the results of the basic skills screening test which prisoners may be invited, but are not required, to take. These suggest that between 60 and 75 per cent. of prisoners have basic skills needs deficiencies: 60 per cent. of prisoners have poor literacy skills; and 75 per cent. of prisoners have poor numeracy skills.

Prison education focuses on the Prison Service Core Curriculum, which comprises basic educational skills (literacy and numeracy), life and social skills and information technology skills. All prisons and young offender institutions are required to offer this programme, which has been designed to help prisoners find a job on release, resettle themselves into society and cope with life after prison without re-offending.

The Prisons Board has recently endorsed an education policy framework for prison education which is consistent with the Government's wider education priority of improving basic skills and improving the skills in the national labour force.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meet that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49805]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49807]

Mr. Straw: Anyone wanting to contact the Home Office by e-Mail can do so by using—gen.ho.@gtnet.gov.uk. At present, there is no separate e-Mail address for my Department's Ministerial correspondence unit.

Prisoners (Methadone)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the policy of the Prison Service in respect of prisoners who enter custody with existing methadone prescriptions; and to what extent the implementation of this policy varies between prisons in England and Wales. [50251]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service health care standard for the management of opiate misusers calls for abstinence to be achieved wherever possible. The standard does, however, allow for the provision of methadone maintenance for those remand prisoners who are already on maintenance treatment and require its continuation.

The Prison Service will begin actively to monitor the implementation of its health care standards from September 1998 and information about the extent to which the implementation varies across the prison estate will become available after that.

Police (Drug Problems)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on co-operation between Colombia and the West Midlands police on drug problems. [48633]

Mr. Michael: Colombia is the world's largest producer and distributor of refined cocaine. Western Europe and the United Kingdom are major targets for this illicit trade. We believe that constructive anti-drug co-operation and assistance can help their law enforcement authorities counter the problem more effectively. Law enforcement co-operation between the United Kingdom and Colombia is excellent. Since 1989 we have provided £15 million of

equipment and training to Colombia. I am not aware of any current links between West Midlands Police and Colombia on drug problems.

Prisons (Midwifery Services)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of prisons make use of community midwifery services to provide antenatal and postnatal care within prisons; [50038]

(2) what proportion of women's prisons have agreed joint local protocols with their nearest hospital for the care of pregnant prisoners. [50034]

Ms Quin: All prisons which hold pregnant women provide a community midwifery service through the local NHS Trust. All but two of those prisons also have locally agreed arrangements for hospital care for pregnant prisoners.

Of the two which do not, one has a local protocol for the care of pregnant women agreed with the NHS midwifery service; and the other is in the process of agreeing an arrangement with the local hospital.

Terrorist Offences

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each year since 1976 the number of persons accused of terrorist crimes in the United Kingdom tried under the Criminal Law Jurisdiction Act 1975 in the Irish Republic specifying in so far as the information is readily available to him the offence alleged, where it was committed and the outcome of the trial. [46743]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have been asked to reply.

The extraterritorial legislation that would allow persons to be charged and tried in the Republic of Ireland is the Criminal Law (Jurisdiction) Act 1976, not the Criminal Jurisdiction Act 1975 which applies only in Northern Ireland. Accurate figures for 1976–1990 are 16 persons tried and 12 convicted. It has proved difficult to establish the offence and location. However, since 1990 the figures are as follows:

Date	*Offence*	*Where*	*Result*
1991	Membership of unlawful organisation	Rosslea	Acquitted
1992	Attempted murder	Belleek	12 years
1992	Attempted murder	Belleek	12 years
1995	Attempted murder	Belleek	12 years

TREASURY

Bank of England, Cardiff Bay

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rent-free period applied under the lease of the new Wales office of the Bank of England at Scott Harbour, Cardiff Bay. [49446]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* Under the terms agreed to take a lease on offices for its Wales agency in Cardiff, the Bank of England benefited from a rent free period of one month.

Family Incomes

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the highest possible level of family income which will be supplemented by working families tax credit and/or child care tax allowance. [47484]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The highest possible level of family income which will be supplemented by the WFTC depends on the number, and age, of the children in the family. For example, a family with two children under 11 and maximum eligible childcare costs will still receive some WFTC with family income of around £31,000.

Tax (Hypothecation)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the introduction of a conscience element in income tax collection to enable revenue from people who request it to be allocated to budgets other than defence. [46776]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 22 June 1998]:* One representation has been received on this matter from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of administering a system in which income tax revenue from people who request it is allocated to budgets other than defence. [46775]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 22 June 1998]:* The Government have no proposals to allow income tax to be hypothecated either toward or away from individual departmental budgets and have therefore made no estimate of the costs of administering such a system.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49817]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49819]

Mrs. Liddell: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk

Personal Investment Authority

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the Personal Investment Authority Ombudsman Bureau Limited about their system of charging companies against which complaints are made for their services. [50165]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *105*.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) of 23 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *453–54*, on heavily indebted poor countries, if he will list in respect of each country the creditors in the United Kingdom; if he will estimate how much is owed to each creditor; and if he will make a statement. [50161]

Mrs. Liddell: The export credit debts listed in the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on 23 June are all sovereign debts which are owed directly to ECGD. ECGD is owed a total of £5,389 million by the countries that were listed. In the case of the aid loans that are listed, DFID is the creditor, and is owed a total of £27.55 million.

Interest Rates

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will give the long and the short-term rates of interest in real terms at present relative to *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1993, *(c)* 1987 and *(d)* 1984. [49619]

Mrs. Liddell: Information on nominal interest rates is contained in the ONS publication *Financial Statistics*. Real interest rates can be derived using figures for inflation which are detailed in the ONS publication *Economic Trends*.

Financial Services

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will give the Financial Services Authority a statutory duty to improve the quality of financial services in the marketplace. [50078]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's plans to reform the financial services regulatory structure are intended to deliver an improvement in the quality of financial services regulation to the benefit of both consumers and the industry. The statutory objectives of the Financial Services Authority will include protecting financial services consumers.

Fiscal Indicators

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Treasury proposes to revise its latest published estimates of key fiscal indicators. [50615]

Mr. Darling: The second Industry Act Forecast will be published in the Pre-Budget Report later this year. The date of publication is not yet known.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the efficiency with which the Office for National Statistics delivers its statistical outputs. [50672]

Mrs. Liddell: In order to ensure that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides the best service possible, I am today announcing a review of the way in which the ONS delivers its outputs in order to ensure that it makes best use of the resources available. This review will be taken forward by external consultants who will examine the efficiency with which the ONS delivers its outputs and will also examine the scope for radical changes for both direct service delivery and support services, for example through increased public/private partnerships, business process re-engineering and rationalisation.

The review will be steered by a group with an independent chair. It is envisaged that it will report by the end of the year.

Insurance Regulation

Ms Atherton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the adequacy of arrangements for the regulation of the insurance industry; and if he will make a statement. [50083]

Mrs. Liddell: The planned legislation to reform the structure of financial services regulation will provide for the Financial Services Authority to assume responsibility for all aspects of the regulation of insurance companies.

The Treasury is currently considering responses to the consultation document issued on 7 April on the regulation of insurance brokers and other intermediaries.

MIRAS

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for 1996–97 the amount of MIRAS spent in Scotland and for 1997–98 and 1998–99 the estimated amount to be spent on MIRAS in Scotland. [47975]

Dawn Primarolo *[pursuant to her reply, 3 July 1998, c. 322]:* The cost of mortgage interest relief in Scotland is estimated to be £180 million in 1996–97 and £200 million in 1997–98. The amount of relief given through the MIRAS—mortgage interest relief at source scheme—is estimated to be £170 million in 1996–97 and £190 million in 1997–98.

These estimates are based on the regional distribution of the cost of mortgage interest relief from analyses of family expenditure surveys up to 1996–97. The estimates for 1997–98 are projections based on applying the same regional distribution as in 1996–97 to the total figure for 1997–98. It is not possible to provide reliable estimates below United Kingdom level for 1998–99.

SCOTLAND

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49825]

Mr. Dewar: My Department's e-Mail address is ceu@isd01.scotoff.gov.uk.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49823]

Mr. Dewar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

NHS Expenditure

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the value of capital expenditure in (i) real terms, (ii) cash terms and (iii) as a percentage of total National Health Service expenditure in Scotland that will be undertaken by the National Health Service in the years *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–2002 and *(d)* 2001–2002. [50160]

Mr. Galbraith: The public sector baseline for capital in 1998–99 is £136m which represents 2.9 per cent. of the total expenditure of £4,626m on the NHS in Scotland. In addition a further £180m of private sector capital is expected to be spent in 1998–99 on the NHSiS through the Private Finance Initiative.

Provision for future years will be announced in due course as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Hospital Consultants

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many hospital consultants have been dismissed in each of the past five years; how many of these appealed against their dismissal; how many were reinstated following a successful appeal; and if he will make a statement. [49738]

Mr. Galbraith: Information on the number of consultants dismissed by Trusts and Health Boards in Scotland is not kept centrally. Since 1993, 12 consultants have appealed to the Secretary of State against termination of employment: 3 of these appeals were not upheld; 2 were withdrawn and the appellant reinstated; 2 were withdrawn since a settlement had been reached before the appeal was heard; 3 appeals were time barred; 1 appeal was judged outwith the Secretary of State's jurisdiction and 1 appeal has yet to be heard.

The number of appeals heard each year is very small and many result in reinstatement or an amicable settlement before the full appeal procedure is concluded. Every effort is made to ensure that the appeal process is carried out as quickly as possible.

Allotments

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what recent guidelines have been issued to local authorities about the designation and provision of allotment sites; and if he will make a statement; [49001]

(2) what action he proposes to take to protect existing allotment sites; and if he will make a statement; [49003]

(3) what recent representations he has received about the provision of allotments; and if he will make a statement; [49005]

(4) what advice his Department gives to local authorities on the subject of the sale of allotment sites; and if he will make a statement; [49007]

(5) what recent discussions he has held with COSLA on the drawing up of a best practice regime for allotments and its implementation by local authorities as recommended in the Fifth report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (HC560-I); and if he will make a statement; [49131]

(6) what plans he has to modify the legislation governing *(a)* the provision of allotment sites and *(b)* the rights of allotment holders; and if he will make a statement; [49002]

(7) what recent discussions he has had with representatives of COSLA about the annual publication of local authority allotments provision; and if he will make a statement; [49004]

(8) what recent representations he has received about the sale by local authorities of allotment sites; and if he will make a statement; [49006]

(9) if he will make a statement on the recommendation in paragraph 5 of the Fifth report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, (HC560-I); [49130]

(10) what plans he has to collate the information on allotment provision held at local authority level in order to establish and maintain a data base on such provision; and if he will make a statement. [49161]

Mr. Macdonald: In Scotland, decisions on the provision of allotment sites are a matter for local authorities. The Scottish Office has issued no recent guidelines and Ministers have had no recent discussions with COSLA on the subject. The Scottish Office has received three representations within the past year about the protection of allotment sites: two about the Dalmuir plots in Clydebank, and one about the Craigentinny plots in Edinburgh.

The Government are considering the recommendations contained in the Fifth Report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, and will publish a response in due course.

Geriatric Unit (Greenock)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects a contract to be signed for the construction of a geriatric unit at the Larkfield Site, Greenock; and if he will make a statement. [49736]

Mr. Galbraith: The Renfrewshire Healthcare NHS Trust are aiming to sign a contract for the new facility at Larkfield in October.

Residential Development (Gourock)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he has received the Chief Reporter's report and recommendations anent the application for a residential development at Levan Farm, Gourock; and if he will make a statement. [49739]

Mr. Dewar: The Chief Reporter of The Scottish Office Inquiry Reporters Unit expects to have his report and recommendations regarding the application for a residential development at Levan Farm, Gourock with me within the next few weeks. Given that I am to take the decision on this matter, it would not be appropriate to make a statement at this time.

Trust Board Committees

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to issue guidelines anent trust board committees being open to the public; and if he will make a statement. [49737]

Mr. Galbraith: The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) (National Health Service Trusts) Order was laid before Parliament and became effective on 6 February 1998. This made it statutory for all UK NHS Trusts to hold their Board meetings in public. Guidance from the Management Executive of the NHS in Scotland on the implementation of this amendment, with particular regard to Committees of Trusts, was issued to the main health bodies in Scotland on 15 April and 5 June. Copies of this guidance have now been placed in the Library of the House.

Patients (Costs)

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the average cost per day of keeping a person in hospital in the most recent year for which information is available *(a)* for all patients and *(b)* for patients suffering from diseases of the respiratory system, excluding influenza. [49719]

Mr. Galbraith: The latest year for which information is available is 1996–97. In that year the average cost per day of keeping a patient in hospital for all specialties was £170. In respiratory medicine the average cost per inpatient day was £185. Figures for respiratory medicine excluding influenza are not available.

Pharmaceutical Services (Costs)

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the cost to the NHS in Scotland of pharmaceutical services, net of prescription charges, for each year from 1985–86 to 1997–98, separately identifying costs arising from prescriptions from *(a)* dispensing doctors, *(b)* pharmacies and *(c)* hospitals. [49717]

Mr. Galbraith: The information for Scotland for the financial years 1987–88 to 1997–98 is set out in the table. Costs for 1985–86 and 1986–87 are not available because the data were not collected electronically, in financial years prior to 1987.

The total costs shown include the ingredient costs of drugs and appliances dispensed through community pharmacies, dispensing doctors and appliance suppliers, dispensing and other fees, and the reimbursement of certain other costs, including VAT. The costs are net of prescription charges paid by patients and prescription charges recovered from patients under health board post-dispensing/checking arrangements.

The sums collected in respect of the sales of pre-payment certificates have not been taken into account because they are not deemed to be the payment of a charge under the NHS (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) (Scotland) Regulations 1989, as amended.

It is not possible to cost separately prescriptions written in hospitals and dispensed in community pharmacies.

£ million

Year	*Total costs*	*Costs dispensing doctors*	*Costs pharmacies*
1987–88	219.54	7.81	210.27
1988–89	244.80	8.97	234.44
1989–90	273.41	9.93	261.58
1990–91	300.49	11.21	286.96
1991–92	337.12	13.03	321.35
1992–93	378.41	14.65	360.24
1993–94	409.53	16.14	389.18
1994–95	444.76	17.47	422.57
1995–96	481.73	18.10	457.23
1996–97	521.85	19.96	495.77
1997–98[1]	568.47	21.44	539.58

[1] provisional

Respiratory Diseases

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each month in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1996 admissions to hospitals for (i) asthma, (ii) bronchitis, (iii) pneumonia, (iv) influenza, (v) hypertensive heart disease, (vi) ischaemic heart disease and (vii) myocardial infarction for the age bands (1) 0 to 14, (2) 14 to 64 and (3) 65 years and over. [49720]

Mr. Galbraith: As the information requested is rather lengthy I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the House Library.

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many prescriptions were issued for treatment of respiratory diseases, excluding influenza, in the most recent year for which information is available; and what was the cost to the National Health Service in Scotland in the same period of drugs to treat (i) asthma, (ii) pneumonia and (iii) bronchitis. [49718]

Mr. Galbraith: It is not possible to identify separately drugs used in the treatment of influenza, pneumonia and bronchitis because these drugs are also used in the treatment of conditions other than respiratory disease and the NHS prescription form does not indicate the medical diagnosis for which a drug has been prescribed.

Table 1 shows the number of prescriptions for drugs contained in British National Formulary Chapter 3: Respiratory system, which were dispensed by community pharmacists and dispensing doctors in 1997–98. The table does not show prescriptions dispensed in respect of Diamorphine Hydrochloride, Methadone Hydrochloride and Morphine Hydrochloride, which are indicated for cough in terminal disease.

British National Formulary Sections 3.1 (Bronchodilators), 3.2 (Corticosteroids) and 3.3 (Cromoglycate and related therapy) contain drugs for use in the treatment of asthma. Table 2 shows the number and cost of prescription items dispensed in respect of these drugs, some of which may also be used in the treatment of other conditions. The costs shown are based on the value of ingredients before the addition of dispensing fees or deduction of any discount or patient charges.

Table 1: Respiratory disease—number of prescription items dispensed; British National Formulary Chapter 3

Year	Prescription items dispensed
1997–98	5,163,048

Table 2: Asthma—prescription items dispensed and cost; British National Formulary Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

Year	Prescription items dispensed	Ingredient cost (£)
1997–98	4,010,219	54,800,656

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49844]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49846]

Dr. Howells: The e-mail address for the Department for Education and Employment's Ministerial Correspondence Unit is:

dfee.ministers@dfee.gov.uk.

Key Stage 2

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the relative difficulty of this year's and last year's Key Stage 2 tests; and if the percentage mark required to achieve Grade 5 has been changed. [50387]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Student Loans

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his latest estimate of the cost of loans to higher education students measured in terms of cash accounting and resource accounting over the period 1999–2000 to 2001–02. [50648]

Mr. Blunkett: The estimated cost of loans is as follows:

£ million

	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Cash accounting	1,150	1,550	1,750
Resource accounting	650	950	1,050
Difference	500	600	700

Estimate are for loans outlay net of repayments under cash accounting. Figures are for England and Wales and are rounded to the nearest £50 million. They are in current prices.

Methods of implementing resource accounting are still being determined. These figures reflect the latest conclusion from the Financial Reporting Advisory Board and the National Audit Office.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to make Regulations for 1998–99 governing student loans made under the Education (Student Loans) Act 1990. [50647]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State laid the Education (Student Loans) Amendment Regulations 1998 before the House on Friday 10 July 1998. These will enable loans to continue to be made to students already attending courses of higher education on the same terms as before. Regulations governing loans for students entering higher education for the first time in September 1998 will be made shortly, as soon as Royal Assent to the Teaching and Higher Education Bill is received.

Permanent Exclusions

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many permanent exclusions there were from schools by local education authority area in each of the last five years broken down by ethnic origin; what strategies are being developed to reduce the number of pupils excluded; and if he will make a statement. [49685]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information on permanent exclusions by ethnic group from schools in each local education authority is set out in the following table. Data on exclusions were not collected centrally before 1994–95. The 1996–97 data are currently being analysed and will be available later this year.

The Government are tackling exclusion by implementing the recommendations in the Social Exclusion Unit's *Truancy and School Exclusion* report, copies of which have been placed in the Library. The report highlighted the over-representation of certain ethnic minority pupils among those excluded from school, and included recommendations to tackle this, including the promotion of community mentoring in ethnic minority communities. In addition, a number of projects supported by grant paid under Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 employ strategies designed to reduce exclusions of pupils from particular minority ethnic groups. These include home-school liaison, mentoring, and other strategies designed to motivate pupils to learn and to raise teacher expectations.

Number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools by ethnic group and Local Education Authority Area

England 1994–95 and 1995–96

	Unclassified		White		Black Caribbean		Black African		Black Other		Indian	
	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96
City of London	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Camden	6	2	28	24	5	5	5	9	6	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Greenwich	[1] —	[1] —	39	52	8	12	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	9	[1] —	[1] —
Hackney	[1] —	[1] —	9	6	9	17	[1] —	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Hammersmith and Fulham	[1] —	[1] —	28	24	29	21	6	6	[1] —	7	[1] —	[1] —
Islington	[1] —	[1] —	36	36	17	15	5	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Kensington and Chelsea	[1] —	[1] —	7	12	9	7	6	[1] —	[1] —	5	[1] —	[1] —
Lambeth	[1] —	[1] —	12	19	31	34	[1] —	7	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Lewisham	[1] —	[1] —	23	29	26	32	[1] —	[1] —	11	8	[1] —	[1] —
Southwark	[1] —	[1] —	31	27	38	38	20	19	5	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Tower Hamlets	[1] —	[1] —	32	24	9	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Wandsworth	[1] —	[1] —	25	29	42	43	12	14	[1] —	6	[1] —	[1] —
Westminster	[1] —	[1] —	25	20	12	25	6	13	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Barking and Dagenham	[1] —	[1] —	52	55	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Barnet	[1] —	5	81	44	10	10	6	10	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bexley	15	[1] —	39	57	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Brent	[1] —	[1] —	30	20	51	66	7	14	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bromley	[1] —	[1] —	86	85	[1] —	6	[1] —	9	[1] —	10	[1] —	[1] —
Croydon	[1] —	[1] —	76	64	34	34	9	9	6	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Ealing	[1] —	[1] —	35	32	21	25	6	10	[1] —	5	7	11
Enfield	[1] —	[1] —	44	55	24	14	[1] —	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Haringey	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	7	27	[1] —	6	[1] —	5	[1] —	[1] —
Harrow	[1] —	[1] —	34	27	12	12	[1] —	6	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	5
Havering	[1] —	[1] —	58	70	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Hillingdon	[1] —	[1] —	57	61	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	6
Hounslow	[1] —	[1] —	58	52	8	8	[1] —	5	[1] —	[1] —	5	11
Kingston-upon-Thames	[1] —	[1] —	23	35	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Merton	[1] —	[1] —	20	33	9	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Newham	[1] —	[1] —	21	23	16	8	5	6	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Redbridge	[1] —	[1] —	22	18	[1] —	[1] —	7	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	7	[1] —
Richmond-upon-Thames	[1] —	[1] —	28	42	6	8	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Sutton	[1] —	[1] —	34	30	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Waltham Forest	5	[1] —	51	50	14	30	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	5	[1] —	[1] —
Birmingham	8	[1] —	130	170	79	85	[1] —	[1] —	5	[1] —	[1] —	7
Coventry	[1] —	[1] —	88	71	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Dudley	[1] —	[1] —	52	47	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Sandwell	[1] —	[1] —	76	78	18	27	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	11	6
Solihull	5	[1] —	33	29	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Walsall	[1] —	[1] —	41	69	5	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Wolverhampton	[1] —	[1] —	39	38	18	23	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	12	[1] —	10
Knowsley	[1] —	[1] —	28	38	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Liverpool	[1] —	[1] —	116	188	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	15	7	[1] —	[1] —
St. Helens	[1] —	[1] —	30	39	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Sefton	[1] —	[1] —	46	66	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Wirral	[1] —	[1] —	50	49	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bolton	[1] —	[1] —	89	77	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	5
Bury	[1] —	[1] —	57	72	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Manchester	6	[1] —	109	147	22	36	[1] —	[1] —	7	14	[1] —	[1] —
Oldham	[1] —	[1] —	38	60	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Rochdale	[1] —	[1] —	29	43	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Salford	[1] —	[1] —	112	102	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Stockport	[1] —	[1] —	39	68	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Tameside	[1] —	[1] —	58	67	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Trafford	[1] —	[1] —	37	27	[1] —	6	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Wigan	[1] —	[1] —	51	71	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Barnsley	[1] —	[1] —	16	38	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Doncaster	[1] —	[1] —	100	130	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Rotherham	[1] —	[1] —	47	36	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Sheffield	[1] —	[1] —	71	124	9	18	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bradford	[1] —	[1] —	100	137	[1] —	8	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Calderdale	[1] —	[1] —	23	29	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Kirklees	[1] —	[1] —	39	49	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Leeds	[1] —	[1] —	158	152	10	12	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	9	[1] —	[1] —
Wakefield	[1] —	[1] —	102	99	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Gateshead	[1] —	[1] —	33	32	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	[1] —	[1] —	92	114	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
North Tyneside	[1] —	[1] —	60	72	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
South Tyneside	[1] —	[1] —	64	89	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Sunderland	[1] —	[1] —	48	49	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Isles of Scilly	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Avon	11	[1] —	201	[1] —	11	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	9	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bath and North East Somerset[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	26	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
City of Bristol[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	114	[1] —	12	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	9	[1] —	[1] —
North Somerset[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	29	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
South Gloucestershire[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	50	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Bedfordshire	[1] —	[1] —	103	106	14	14	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	6	[1] —
Berkshire	6	[1] —	164	191	14	16	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	5	[1] —
Buckinghamshire	[1] —	[1] —	79	85	[1] —	9	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Cambridge	7	[1] —	102	115	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Cheshire	[1] —	[1] —	167	202	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Cleveland	[1] —	[1] —	88	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Hartlepool[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	17	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Middlesbrough[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	21	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Redcar and Cleveland[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	34	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —
Stockton-on-Tees[2]	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	39	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —	[1] —

Number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools by ethnic group and Local Education Authority Area

England 1994–95 and 1995–96

	Unclassified		White		Black Caribbean		Black African		Black Other		Indian	
	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96
Cornwall	—	—	81	98	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cumbria	—	—	79	106	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Derbyshire	—	—	155	234	5	—	—	7	—	—	—	—
Devon	—	—	135	148	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dorset	—	—	115	124	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Durham	—	—	112	125	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
East Sussex	—	—	146	144	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Essex	—	—	201	267	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gloucestershire	—	—	107	131	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hampshire	11	—	357	454	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hereford and Worcester	—	—	123	140	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hertfordshire	—	—	159	231	7	13	—	—	—	—	—	—
Humberside	—	—	107	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
City of Kingston-Upon-Hull[1]	—	—	—	44	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
East Riding of Yorkshire[1]	—	—	—	32	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
North East Lincolnshire[1]	—	—	—	43	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
North Lincolnshire[1]	—	—	—	31	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Isle of Wight	—	—	12	12	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kent	—	—	344	424	—	5	—	—	—	—	5	—
Lancashire	—	—	298	333	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Leicestershire	—	—	157	197	8	13	—	—	—	—	—	14
Lincolnshire	5	—	112	111	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Norfolk	—	—	103	120	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
North Yorkshire[1]	—	—	86	77	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
York[1]	—	—	—	35	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Northamptonshire	—	—	132	157	11	—	—	—	—	8	—	—
Northumberland	—	—	66	92	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Nottinghamshire	—	—	203	280	12	20	—	—	12	15	—	—
Oxfordshire	—	—	37	43	5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Shropshire	—	—	110	139	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Somerset	—	—	62	71	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Staffordshire	—	—	242	247	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suffolk	—	—	104	108	—	—	—	—	6	—	—	—
Surrey	—	—	198	199	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Warwickshire	—	—	73	89	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
West Sussex	—	—	113	142	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wiltshire	—	—	103	88	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	183	10	8,785	10,280	769	884	146	225	182	245	98	122

Number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools by ethnic group and Local Education Authority Area

England 1994–95 and 1995–96

	Pakistani		Bangladeshi		Chinese		Other Ethnic Group		Totals	
	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96
City of London	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0	0
Camden	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	54	51
Greenwich	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	14	57	90
Hackney	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	23	38
Hammersmith and Fulham	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	6	73	64
Islington	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	16	67	75
Kensington and Chelsea	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	—	31	29
Lambeth	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	55	66
Lewisham	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	5	68	79
Southwark	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	96	89
Tower Hamlets	—	—	8	22	—	—	—	—	59	54
Wandsworth	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	7	90	103
Westminster	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	8	59	71
Barking and Dagenham	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	57	67
Barnet	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	7	108	77
Bexley	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	55	61
Brent	7	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	104	114
Bromley	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	—	101	111
Croydon	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	134	119
Ealing	—	6	—	—	—	—	—	6	73	96
Enfield	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	13	85	92
Haringey	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	19	49
Harrow	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	55	65
Havering	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	60	72
Hillingdon	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	65	71
Hounslow	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	—	87	88
Kingston-upon-Thames	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	26	38
Merton	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	35	50
Newham	—	—	—	—	—	—	7	—	54	43
Redbridge	5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	52	32
Richmond-upon-Thames	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	34	52
Sutton	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	37	32
Waltham Forest	14	19	—	—	—	—	—	—	91	113

Number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools by ethnic group and Local Education Authority Area

England 1994–95 and 1995–96

	Pakistani		Bangladeshi		Chinese		Other Ethnic Group		Totals	
	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96	1994–95	1995–96
Birmingham	28	24	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	11	50	266	339
Coventry	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7	[2]—	1.4	86
Dudley	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	55	51
Sandwell	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	[2]—	120	121
Solihull	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	41	37
Walsall	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	58	80
Wolverhampton	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7	5	70	92
Knowsley	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	29	42
Liverpool	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	142	200
St. Helens	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	30	40
Sefton	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	47	68
Wirral	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	52	51
Bolton	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	95	87
Bury	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	63	77
Manchester	6	7	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7	152	216
Oldham	9	7	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	49	76
Rochdale	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	31	47
Salford	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	115	103
Stockport	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	40	70
Tameside	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	61	68
Trafford	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	47	34
Wigan	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	55	73
Barnsley	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	16	39
Doncaster	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	105	133
Rotherham	[2]—	8	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	50	44
Sheffield	[2]—	12	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	9	94	165
Bradford	18	34	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	128	187
Calderdale	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	24	34
Kirklees	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	54	60
Leeds	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	182	182
Wakefield	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	104	103
Gateshead	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	34	32
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	95	117
North Tyneside	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	60	72
South Tyneside	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	67	92
Sunderland	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	49	49
Isles of Scilly	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Avon	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	7	[1]—	246	[1]—
Bath and North East Somerset[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	28
City of Bristol[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	139
North Somerset[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	29
South Gloucestershire[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	53
Bedfordshire	7	10	5	6	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	137	147
Berkshire	7	13	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	204	232
Buckinghamshire	9	10	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	6	[2]—	104	110
Cambridge	[2]—	9	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	115	126
Cheshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	178	207
Cleveland	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	90	[1]—
Hartlepool[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	17
Middlesbrough[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	21
Redcar and Cleveland[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	34
Stockton-on-Tees[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	40
Cornwall	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	81	99
Cumbria	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	79	106
Derbyshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7	167	257
Devon	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	139	148
Dorset	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	116	126
Durham	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	114	126
East Sussex	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	151	155
Essex	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	210	272
Gloucestershire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	6	119	142
Hampshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	8	376	476
Hereford and Worcester	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	127	141
Hertfordshire	5	6	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	6	6	188	266
Humberside	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	108	[1]—
City of Kingston-Upon-Hull[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	44
East Riding of Yorkshire[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	32
North East Lincolnshire[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	43
North Lincolnshire[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	33
Isle of Wight	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	13	13
Kent	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	12	362	447
Lancashire	20	21	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	326	366
Leicestershire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	9	12	184	240
Lincolnshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	117	114
Norfolk	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	104	122
North Yorkshire[1]	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	88	78
York[1]	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	[2]—	[1]—	36
Northamptonshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5	149	176

Number of permanent exclusions from maintained primary, secondary and special schools by ethnic group and Local Education Authority Area

England 1994–95 and 1995–96

	Pakistani		Bangladeshi		Chinese		Other Ethnic Group		Totals	
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Northumberland	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	66	93
Nottinghamshire	6	7	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7	238	330
Oxfordshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	49	47
Shropshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	113	148
Somerset	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	62	71
Staffordshire	5	11	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	256	268
Suffolk	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	117	112
Surrey	[2]—	5	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	6	218	215
Warwickshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	77	95
West Sussex	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	120	145
Wiltshire	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	6	[2]—	113	93
Total	208	270	46	59	11	15	241	370	10,669	12,476

[1] New Authorities from 1 April 1996
[2] Fewer than 5 pupils
[3] Not applicable

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Identity Cards

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which Minister is responsible for benefit identity cards; and what progress has been made with regard to their implementation. [50355]

Mr. Field: There is no benefit identity card.

We are however concerned about fraud within the Social Security system. On some estimates benefit fraud could cost up to £7 billion a year. This is equivalent to an extra £10 a week to every single pensioner in the country. Or enough to cut the tax bill of every taxpaying household in the country by £435 a year.

I am therefore pleased to announce that we are today publishing a Green Paper "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: Securing the Future" setting out our comprehensive anti-fraud strategy.

The Green Paper sets out the four key aims of the Government's strategy and lists what actions we are currently taking to achieve these goals; what further action we will be taking this year, next year and beyond.

The first aim is to develop an anti-fraud culture among staff and the public. We will be conducting a campaign to bring the scale and nature of fraud to people's attention to win public support for action to prevent the misuse of money which could go to those in real need. We will also build on the partnerships between the public and private sector to mount a joint crusade against fraud.

Our second aim is to design and operate systems which minimise fraud. We will be reviewing benefits to determine the extent to which they can be more effectively designed to prevent fraud from occurring in the first place. We will also be seeking to prevent fraud through a more active management of new and continuing cases, as well as improved detection and more effective punishment of those who commit fraud.

Our third aim is to create an environment in which work against fraud can flourish, by improving systems for funding and performance measurement, and securing greater co-operation amongst all parties in anti-fraud in central, and local, government, and in public bodies.

Our fourth aim is to develop a highly skilled anti-fraud profession. We need a new professionalism to combat the ever increasing sophistication of the serious fraudster. We will build up a highly skilled anti-fraud profession with common training and accreditation, and codes of conduct.

For the first time there now exists a comprehensive cross-Government strategy against fraud rather than a piecemeal approach. We have timetabled our work in building up effective barriers to fraud. The Government are establishing a ministerial group under my chairmanship to help devise strategies to combat welfare fraud and safeguard taxpayers' money, and counter other forms of financial fraud affecting welfare services. We will also publish an annual Fraud Audit, describing our anti-fraud activities, estimates of the scale of fraud, and new policy initiatives.

The Government are committed to making a difference to the level of fraud as a key element of their plan to create a modern welfare state in which the people can have confidence. The Green Paper is the first staging post towards a benefit system which is more accurate, more fair, more efficient and more secure.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the early results from the research into pensioner non-take-up of income support have been consistent with the results from large-scale quantitative surveys undertaken by the Department with respect to *(a)* the level of non-take-up and *(b)* the distribution of non-take-up between different categories of pensioner. [50114]

Mr. Denham: The early results published 24 June 1998 offered an overview of key barriers and triggers to claiming Income Support amongst a specific group of pensioners—those apparently entitled to, but not claiming, the benefit. They were from qualitative interviews carried out to explore the reasons for not claiming Income Support and to identify possible means of encouraging pensioners to claim. As such, the results were not designed to provide the data that would be needed for such comparisons.

This is the first research carried out by this Department specifically into why pensioners do not take up the Income Support to which they are entitled. The purpose of the research, and of the nine pilots currently underway, is not to provide comparative data with previous information on non-take-up, but rather to establish why so many pensioners fail to take up the Income Support to which they are entitled, and to identify the most effective and efficient ways of encouraging them to claim.

Together, the research and the pilot exercises will enable us to find ways of delivering more automatic help to the poorest pensioners.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the median amount of unclaimed income support among *(a)* single male pensioners, *(b)* single female pensioners and *(c)* married pensioners who are aged (i) 60 to 64, (ii) 65 to 69, (iii) 70 to 74, (iv) 75 to 79 and (v) 80 years and above, based on the Department's Family Resources Survey. [50113]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

Median unclaimed amounts for pensioners by age, gender and marital status for 1995–96

£

Pensioner group	Age 60–64	65–69	70–74	75–79	80+	All
Pensioner couples	16.80	22.60	5.20	6.80	9.50	9.90
Single male pensioners	7.70	10.10	7.30	8.30	8.20	10.00
Single female pensioners	4.90	5.90	5.30	7.10	12.40	8.40

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10p. These estimates are based on the 1995–96 FRS and are almost certainly subject to some degree of error. The true amounts may be higher or lower and should therefore be treated with some caution. The age breakdowns for Pensioner Couples and Single Male Pensioners are based on small sample sizes and should therefore be treated with extreme caution
2. "Pensioner couples" means both married and unmarried couples

Source:

Family Resources Survey (FRS) 1995–96

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what target her Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49894]

Mr. Field: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Answer today from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the e-mail address of her Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49896]

Mr. Field: Ministers may be contacted at the following address: ministers@ade006.dss.gov.uk.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how staff numbers in her Department have varied between 1 May 1997 and 31 March 1998. [48884]

Mr. Field: The information is set out in the table.

Staff in post, 1 May 1997 and 31 March 1998

Agency	1 May 1997 Permanent	1 May 1997 Casual	31 March 1998 Permanent	31 March 1998 Casual	Difference Permanent	Difference Casual
Headquarters	1,431.3	48.2	1,688.3	48.6	257	0.4
Benefits Agency	71,642.2	3,668.9	67,352.5	4,029	−4,289.7	360.1
Contributions Agency	7,406.2	639.6	7,470.8	584	64.6	−55.6
Child Support Agency	7,923.7	373.8	7,925.3	357	1.6	−16.8
ITSA[1]	1,970.8	83.9	1,854.4	70	−116.4	−13.9
War Pensions Agency	1,184.3	25.6	958.6	16	−225.7	−9.6
ISBs[2]	1,121.5	60	1,118	162.4	−3.5	102.4
Total	92,680	4,900	88,367.9	5,267	−4,312.1	367

[1] ITSA=Information Technology Services Agency

[2] ISBs=Independent Statutory Bodies

Notes:

1. The figures for permanent staff include fixed term contracts
2. The figures are consistent with those in the Departmental Annual Report
3. Part time staff are shown as decimal figures, representing the hours worked as a proportion of a full working week

Disablement Benefit

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how long a claimant for disablement benefit in respect of occupational deafness must have worked; if additional hours worked in overtime may be included in this requirement; and what proposals she has to change the current criteria. [48938]

Mr. Denham: To qualify for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) for Occupational Deafness (prescribed disease A10), a person must have been employed in one or more of the occupations prescribed, for at least ten years. An independent Adjudication Officer decides whether a claimant has met the ten year rule, taking into account the job history of the individual claimant. The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, which advise on the Industrial Injuries scheme, are currently undertaking a review of the list of prescribed diseases, including occupational deafness. We shall of course consider any recommendations which they make.

Elderly People

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of households in Gloucestershire, by district, have an elderly dependant needing care. [49257]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available.

HEALTH

Pharmacists

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the potential cost to the National Health Service of trends in closures of community pharmacies. [48233]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 1 July 1998]:* The overall number of community pharmacies in England and Wales has remained virtually unchanged over the last three years. It is difficult to estimate the cost, if any, to the National Health Service of any particular closures that have occurred during this period.

Pen Needles

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when pen needles will be available to diabetes sufferers on prescription; [47998]

(2) if will make a statement on the use of pen needles as a method for diabetes sufferers to administer insulin. [47919]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 1 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) on 28 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *121*.

Diabetes

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people suffering from diabetes there were within the Durham Health Authority Easington District locality area in each year since 1995. [49281]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not held centrally.

Beef on the Bone

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the risk to human health of eating beef cooked on the bone; and what the estimated incidence is of health problems from this cause. [49631]

Ms Jowell: In its advice to Ministers on 3 December 1997, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) said that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) infectivity had been found in the dorsal root ganglia and bone marrow of cattle and there was a small risk of BSE-infected material entering the human food chain. On the basis of the risk assessment concerning the various factors involved in the transmission of BSE to humans available to it, the Committee concluded that there was a 95 per cent. chance of no cases of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and a 5 per cent. chance of one case arising from this exposure in 1998.

Taking account of this advice, and that of the Chief Medical Officer that he would be very concerned if any tissues that had been shown to transmit BSE were knowingly allowed to remain in the human food chain, we introduced the Beef Bones Regulations.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into possible links between breast cancer and pesticides containing Lindane. [50060]

Ms Jowell: The Department has not commissioned any research into possible links between breast cancer and pesticides containing lindane.

The independent advisory Committee on Carcinogenity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products, and the Environment (COC) reviewed the available data on breast cancer in women and levels of lindane in serum and breast fat tissue in 1995. COC concluded that there was no clear evidence of an association between serum and fat levels of lindane and breast cancer. COC recommended that the matter be kept under review.

The Department of Health is conducting a search for any new scientific data on lindane and, if fresh information is uncovered, this will be referred to COC for further consideration.

Children in Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proportion of children looked after in residential care are from ethnic minority groups; [49712]

(2) what proportion of children adopted from care were from ethnic minority groups in the last year for which figures are available; [49713]

(3) what proportion of children looked after by local authorities for more than two years were from ethnic minority groups in the last year for which figures are available; [49714]

(4) what proportion of children looked after by local authorities are from ethnic minority groups broken down by age and gender. [49715]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* The information is not currently available in the format requested, but the Department will be carrying out a pilot exercise later this year to collect ethnic origin data for looked after children, from a sample of authorities.

Waiting Times

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the maximum waiting times faced by individuals between a referral from a general practitioner and an appointment with a consultant; what guidance he has issued as to maximum acceptable waiting time; and what are his policies to reduce such waiting times. [50005]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* The latest available figures show that, during the quarter ending 31 March 1998, 96 per cent. of patients were seen for their first outpatient appointment within 26 weeks of general practitioner referral.

Guidance issued to the National Health Service with the additional £417 million to tackle waiting lists made clear that reducing inpatient lists should not be achieved at the expense of outpatient waiting times. In addition, *The New NHS* White Paper guarantees that by the year 2000 everyone with suspected cancer will be able to see a specialist within 2 weeks of their GP deciding they need to be seen urgently and requesting an appointment (by April 1999 for breast cancer).

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49852]

Ms Jowell: The Department does not yet have an e-mail address; plans to establish one are being considered.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49850]

Ms Jowell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Dentists

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures his Department intends to take *(a)* to increase the proportion of the adult population which is registered with a dentist and *(b)* to mitigate the effects of the introduction of tuition fees on student dentists' debt levels. [48377]

Mr. Milburn: We are aware that registering with a National Health Service dentist can be a problem for adults in some areas of the country which is why, in September 1997, we introduced the Investing in Dentistry scheme. We have made £19 million available through the scheme to help dentists expand existing practices and to set up new ones in areas where access to NHS dentistry is most acute. To date we have received over 480 Investing in Dentistry proposals from health authorities. In the longer term we will be piloting the personal dental services which will provide health authorities with the flexibility to tailor dental services more closely to local need. I recently announced 15 pilot schemes, involving over 150 dentists, to be launched in October.

For medical and dental students who enter training from 1 September 1998, the NHS will meet tuition costs and fund means tested bursaries in years 5 and beyond.

Cancer

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to invest in clinical drug trials in district hospitals to advance knowledge of cancer treatment. [50115]

Mr. Milburn: The main agency through which the Government support clinical trials is the Medical Research Council (MRC). The MRC is an independent body receiving its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry. The MRC has an extensive programme of clinical trials on cancer including the use of treatments. These are conducted in many locations including district hospitals. Information on these trials is available from the MRC. Their address is 20 Park Crescent, London, W1N 4AL.

Patients (Lifting)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance is given to NHS nursing and auxiliary staff as regards lifting patients in and out of beds indicating if all *(a)* trusts and *(b)* authorities are required to insure nurses and auxiliary staff for back or related injuries sustained from lifting patients; and if she will make a statement. [49452]

Mr. Milburn: The National Health Service Executive issued revised guidance in June 1997 on Health and Safety at work in the NHS, copies of which are available in the Library. The guidance covers manual handling, and refers to complementary guidance in the Health Services Advisory Committee booklet "Guidance on Manual Handling of Loads in the Health Services". It also reminded managers of their responsibilities under the Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992.

All NHS employees are covered by the National Health Service (Injury Benefits) Scheme. This is a statutory scheme providing benefits where an injury or disease, which is attributable to NHS employment, results in either temporary loss of earnings or permanent reduction in earning ability.

WALES

Science and Mathematics Teachers

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the number of *(a)* science and *(b)* mathematics teachers in (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools in Wales. [49562]

Mr. Hain: The latest available information indicates that, in 1996, there were an estimated 2,800 full-time teachers qualified to teach mathematics and 2,700 qualified to teach science at Key stage 3 and at Key stage 4. Comparable information is not available on primary schools.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49826]

Mr. Ron Davies: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49828]

Mr. Ron Davies: The Welsh Office Ministerial Correspondence Unit currently does not have an e-mail address.

Numeracy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales in what ways he proposes to increase numeracy in the primary schools of Wales. [50344]

Mr. Hain: Raising standards of numeracy is at the heart of the Government's programme for raising levels of attainment in schools. We have already set stretching targets for Wales covering literacy and numeracy. We have allocated additional funds to support the In-service training of teachers. This summer, we will be piloting summer numeracy schemes. In the light of the report from the National Numeracy Taskforce, we are now considering what further initiatives in Wales might support this vitally important work in schools.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement concerning the learning of times tables in Welsh schools. [50346]

Mr. Hain: The National Curriculum in Wales places a strong emphasis on the learning of "times tables" for all the children from an early age. The learning of multiplication tables plays a central part in the development of children's understanding of the number system. OHMCI's latest annual report indicates that, in general, mathematics is well taught in schools in Wales. Standards are satisfactory or better in over 90 per cent. of classes in primary schools and over 80 per cent. of classes in secondary schools. The evidence available to us suggests that standards are improving but that much work is needed to reach the national targets we have set for the year 2002.

A key feature which contributes towards improvement is an increasingly strong emphasis on the development of pupils' knowledge of multiplication tables and other number facts. Many primary schools include regular sessions of mental mathematics to develop pupils' capacity to think quickly and to recall their tables.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many local numeracy experts he proposes to advise schools from April 1999; and if he will make a statement. [50345]

Mr. Hain: Many Local Education Authorities in Wales have already appointed numeracy advisors. The Welsh Office will be consulting with LEAs to determine whether the need to improve standards of numeracy requires an increase in the number of expert advisers in future.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made on the examination of options for the disposal of waste arising from the over thirty months scheme; and if he will make a statement. [49716]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* Good progress has been made on this issue. The Intervention Board invited eight companies with a track record in combustion or in the handling of meat and bone meal (MBM) to submit proposals under the negotiated procedures of the EU Services Directive for the incineration of waste MBM from Over Thirty Months Scheme (OTMS) animals. Seven costed proposals were received and these have been evaluated by a Project Board, against criteria of energy recovery, appropriate technology, early deliverability, high volumes and reasonable costs.

Negotiations continue with a view to the early award of contracts to the suppliers best able to meet the Board's requirements. Owing to the commercial sensitivity of these negotiations, it would be inappropriate to identify the companies at this stage but their names will be announced when contracts are signed. Burning under contract is subject to the companies obtaining the necessary planning and environmental consents from the relevant authorities in accordance with normal procedures.

These developments reflect the Government's determination to find solutions which will lead to the destruction of the waste MBM stocks, which currently stand at 330,000 tonnes, while taking full account of the need to protect human health and the environment and at the same time keeping the cost to the taxpayer as low as is consistent with this. An announcement on plans to destroy the OTMS tallow stocks, currently standing at 174,000 tonnes, will be made in the autumn.

British Cattle Movement Service

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many letters were sent by the British Cattle Movement Service where the name on the envelope did not match the address; and what was the cost of writing a second time to correct the mistake; [50042]

(2) what was the cost of replacing the faulty software in respect of advertising the British Cattle Movement Service. [50043]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* The British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS) issued approximately 109,000 leaflets giving details of the BCMS Helpline going live on 1 July, in the week beginning 29 June. We estimate that around 50 per cent. had the wrong name matched to the addresses. The letter of apology sent to livestock farmers, which again provided the BCMS Helpline details in case farmers had missed the previous publicity, cost around £45,000.

The cost of replacing the faulty software was £256.45. The fault concerned mail address labels only, and was entirely unconnected with the integrity of the BCMS database.

Meat Imports

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what statistics his

Department collects on animal rearing practices in respect of meat products imported into the United Kingdom; and if he will publish them. [49523]

Mr. Rooker: Responsibility for approving countries from which meat products may be imported into the European Community, and for collecting information and statistics on practices within those countries to aid decisions on approval, rests with the European Commission. In deciding whether to approve countries, the Commission must, in particular, take account of information on the state of health of the livestock, other domestic animals and wildlife; the provision of information on incidence of certain diseases; the country's rules on disease prevention and control and how these are organised and implemented; the structure of the veterinary services; and legislation on the use, authorisation, distribution and marketing of substances which might be administered to livestock.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Curry: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his estimate of the public expenditure in the current financial year to support activities which will fall under the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency. [48495]

Mr. Rooker: Those Ministry activities that are likely to fall under the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency are covered by MAFF programmes PP1:01, PP1:02, part of PP1:04, PP1:07, PP1:08, PP1:09 and EA1:06. Details of these programmes can be found in the MAFF/Intervention Board 1998 Departmental Report, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. The total estimated provision for these programmes in the current financial year, after allowing for receipts, is approximately £55 million. This figure is for MAFF only and relates to direct costs; it makes no allowance for central service overheads associated with the work in question.

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *557–58*, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in this session would affect women; what consultation he had with women's organisations; and if he will make a statement. [49083]

Mr. Morley: The guidelines to which my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Women referred in her Answer were in place and reflected in Departmental guidelines prior to 18 May. The nature of the Department's responsibilities means that most of its legislative programme does not have a gender-specific impact. Nevertheless, in appropriate cases, national women's organisations have been consulted on proposed legislation.

Organophosphates

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many samples of fruit and vegetables grown in the United Kingdom were tested for organophosphate residues in 1997; and how many were found to exceed the maximum residue levels. [50371]

Mr. Rooker: The latest available survey information relates to samples collected in 1996. A total of 528 samples of various fruits and vegetables were analysed for up to 43 different organophosphate compounds. No residues exceeded the maximum residue levels (MRLs).

I expect the 1997 survey report to be published in September.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many samples of white and brown bread were tested for OP residues in 1997; and how many exceeded the maximum residue levels. [50372]

Mr. Rooker: The latest available survey information relates to samples collected in 1996. 48 samples each of white, brown, wholemeal, wholegrain and ethnic bread were analysed for 10 different organophosphate compounds. No residues exceeded the maximum residue levels (MRLs).

I expect the 1997 survey report to be published in September.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what were the test subjects and what other parameters were used to establish permitted levels of exposure to organophosphates in current use; and how many of these levels were established as a result of research in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* the United States of America and *(c)* elsewhere. [50340]

Mr. Rooker: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost. As a general rule, it is up to the applicant to decide where to carry out the tests required by the regulatory authorities, provided that they are able to demonstrate that tests have been conducted to acceptable standards and under appropriate conditions. Guidance on the scientific studies required to support an application for approval of an agricultural pesticide is set out in the Registration Handbook available from the Pesticides Safety Directorate.

For those pesticide organophosphate active ingredients for which an evaluation document has been published, the test subjects and other parameters (but not the country in which the test was carried out) will normally be quoted.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to what extent the *(a)* synergistic and *(b)* potentiating effects of organophosphates combined with inert ingredients are taken into account when an OP product is licensed. [50339]

Mr. Rooker: When considering or reviewing applications for approval of pesticides, the impact on people and on the environment of both the active substance and the product are taken into account. In this way, the regulators allow for the consequences of any possible synergistic, potentiating or other combination effects.

If the effects which may arise from the proposed or actual use of the product are not acceptable, it is not approved.

Foodstuffs

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what was the estimated total consumption of fruit and vegetables in the United Kingdom for 1997; [50341]

(2) what is the estimated consumption by weight of bread in the United Kingdom for 1997. [50342]

Mr. Rooker: The following estimates are based on grossed-up National Food Survey data. They relate to imported and home-grown foods purchased by households for consumption at home; food eaten outside of the home is excluded as are fruit and vegetables grown privately.

Estimated household purchases of:	*United Kingdom 1997 thousands of tonnes*
Bread	2,190
Fresh potatoes	2,129
Processed potatoes	497
Fresh fruit	2,045
Processed fruit[1]	229
Fresh vegetables	2,084
Processed vegetables[1]	1,055

[1] Excludes fruit and vegetable juices

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49810]

Mr. Morley: The e-mail address for the Department's Correspondence Section is C.corres@sec.maff.gov.uk.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meet that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49808]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to issue for public consultation his detailed proposals for changes to the pre-export procedures for live animals; and if he will make a statement [50573]

Mr. Morley: A public consultation document has been issued today. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

The proposed revised procedures deal with veterinary inspections for the purpose of export health certification for consignments of sheep and pigs destined for fattening, production or slaughter in other EC Member States. They seek to clarify the role of the exporter, the Department and the Local Veterinary Inspector (LVI) in the certification process. A summary of the revised procedures will be made available to the public. A key objective of the proposed revised inspection arrangements will be to ensure that unfit animals are rejected from export health certification.

We intend to establish a new panel of LVIs appointed to undertake these particular export health certifications, from which the LVI to conduct each particular certification will be nominated by the Department. We will provide additional training for veterinarians supervising the export of animals. Where an animal is found to be unfit to travel to the intended destination, LVIs on the new panel will have powers to serve Notices under the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order. The serving of such Notices will ensure that the person in charge of the animal takes the action necessary to protect the welfare of the animal. We intend to encourage exporters to ensure that sufficient facilities and staff are available to aid the inspection of the animals to be certified. We intend to clarify the methods for checking the identity of animals which form part of the proposed export consignment. Finally, we intend to provide clear indicators for the minimum times to be spent by the LVI on the inspection and identification of animals.

I announced on 18 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *116*, that we intended to pay LVIs directly for inspection and certification of consignments, recovering the money by way of a charge (payable on application for certification) by exporters. We remain committed to introducing those changes so that the whole of the certification process for these types of animals can be demonstrated to be entirely independent. The consultation document sets out the general principles which we intend to apply for recovering the costs of these inspections and seeks information to enable us to make proposals about the detail of the changes to the financial arrangements. In order to enable us to calculate the costs of such a change and to come forward with detailed proposals, information is needed not only about current charges (which are a matter between the LVI and the exporter) but also about the likely effects of the proposed revised procedures on such costs. Once we have the responses to this consultation document, we will draw up a further consultation document which outlines our detailed proposals to change the existing financial arrangements, including the legislation necessary to give effect to such a change.

The closing date for comments is 8 September 1998.

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49831]

Mr. Mandelson: The e-mail address of the Cabinet Office Ministerial Correspondence Unit is mcu@ccta.gov.uk.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 July 1998

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Photographic Passes

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if she will list the House passes issued to individuals who also work as employees of, directors of or consultants to *(a)* Prima Europe, *(b)* LLM (Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn) and *(c)* GPC Market Access. [50612]

Mrs. Roe: Such information is not required of applicants for House of Commons photographic passes.

However, holders of such passes who work for hon. Members as secretaries or research assistants do have to supply the Registrar of Members' Interests with full details of any other relevant gainful occupation which they may pursue other than that for which the pass was issued. This information is available for inspection by hon. Members in the Library.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee what assessment he has made of the impact of the year 2000 computer bug on the operation of the House of Commons. [50172]

Mr. Allan: The House of Commons has been actively involved in assessing the Year 2000 problem for some time, and has commissioned a working party under the management of the Network Administrator's Group (NAG). This forum has produced the 'Year 2000 Implementation Guide for the Houses of Parliament', and contains a 'Definition of Year 2000 Conformity Requirements' prepared by the British Standards Institution committee, (their reference BDD/1/-/3). The NAG forum has tested and identified a set of tools and procedures for remedial action.

Each department in the House of Commons is busy developing a project plan, using these NAG recommendations, to ensure their systems are fully compliant. As part of this plan PCD will facilitate a test schedule for weeks commencing the 10 and 17 August 1998 so that all departments can test their computer equipment with the PDVN.

Lavatories

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what is the latest available annual figure for the amount of money spent on the provision of toilet rolls, hand towels and dryers and soap in the Palace of Westminster. [50171]

Mrs. Roe: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms; I have asked him to reply to the hon. Gentleman.

PRIME MINISTER

Media Relations Staff

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what complaints he has received since 2 May 1997 from editors or news editors of improper pressure on their journalists by his, or his Cabinet colleagues', media relations staff. [50534]

The Prime Minister: None.

Lobbyists

Sir George Young: To ask the Prime Minister on what occasions *(a)* he and *(b)* civil servants at No. 10 Downing Street have met representatives of (i) GPC Market Access, (ii) Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn and (iii) GJW Government Relations since 1 May 1997; who these representatives were; and what was discussed at the meetings. [50557]

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the occasions on which any director of Prima Europe or GPC Market Access has visited No. 10 Downing Street, since 1 May 1997; [50475]

(2) if he will list the occasions on which Mr. Roger Liddle has visited the premises of or met any director of GPC Market Access and Prima Europe since 1 May 1997. [50474]

The Prime Minister: Ministers, their Special Advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed one of the specific functions of Special Advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention it is not the practice of Governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available—a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the occasions when Roger Liddle has addressed meetings set up by *(a)* GPC Market Access and *(b)* other lobbying organisations, indicating whether these meetings were held under Chatham House rules. [50462]

The Prime Minister: Special Advisers and other civil servants address events arranged by outside organisations on many occasions, since part of their role is to inform the public and interested bodies about Government policy. Whether any such meetings are held publicly or privately, Special Advisers must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Mirror Group

Mr. Chope: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when inspectors were appointed to investigate the 1991 flotation of the Mirror Group; and what their terms of reference were. [49510]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 8 July 1998]:* The inspectors were appointed on 8 June 1992 to investigate and report on the affairs and membership of Mirror Group Newspapers plc. They were asked to look, in particular, at the offers for sale of the company's shares in early 1991.

Mr. Chope: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to her answer of 2 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *240*, when she expects to receive the report from the inspectors investigating the 1991 flotation of the Mirror Group; and what steps she has taken to expedite the report. [49512]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 8 July 1998]:* It is not possible to forecast the timing of the completion of an investigation of this kind. Inspectors have a distinct statutory position and are independent of my Department. The inspectors are aware of the need to complete their inquiry and report as quickly as possible, consistent with the necessity for them to act fairly.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to publish the inspectors' report into the circumstances of the Mirror Group flotation. [50338]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The inspectors have not yet reported to the Secretary of State. A decision on publication will be taken when the report has been received and fully considered.

Dounreay

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if there has been further investigation of the unaccounted for highly enriched uranium referred to in the Dounreay Shaft Inventory. [50256]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 10 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *594–95*.

The Safeguards Office of my Department is studying the nuclear material accountancy aspects of the UKAEA report "Dounreay Shaft Inventory". In addition, the Safeguards Office study will take into account any further information from UKAEA. The conclusions of the study will be made public.

Post Office

Mr. Hanson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will publish the external financing limit for the Post Office for 1998–99. [50812]

Mrs. Beckett: As announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Post Office is able to carry forward an external financing limit (EFL) over-achievement under the nationalised industries end-year flexibility scheme. The Post Office over-achieved its 1997/98 EFL by £25m, and therefore its negative EFL for 1998/99 has been reduced from -£335 million to -£310 million.

North American Free Trade Agreement

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had with other EU member states with regard to encouraging closer trading links between the EU and NAFTA. [48732]

Mrs. Beckett: During our Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers, the UK hosted EU summits with both the USA and Canada to encourage closer trading links. On 25 May the General Affairs Council also approved negotiating directives for the Commission to pursue the liberalisation of trade with Mexico, as foreseen in the Agreements between the EU and Mexico signed in Luxembourg on 8 December 1997.

Pharmacies

Mr. McWalter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research he has evaluated into the number of pharmacies in the United Kingdom per 10,000 population relative to those in other EU countries. [48223]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

None.

Mr. McWalter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the advantages of regulating prices of over-the-counter medicines; and what research she has evaluated as to practice in other EU countries. [48222]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

We have not considered regulating the prices of over-the-counter medicines, nor have we carried out specific research into practice in other European Union countries. At the 18 May 1998 meeting of the EU Internal Market Council, held under the United Kingdom Presidency, member states agreed unanimously to further pursuit of the single market in over-the-counter medicines, including price liberalisation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans her Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49887]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Each of the Northern Ireland Departments and the Northern Ireland Office has a Web site which includes an Internet e-mail address. The latter enables hon. Members and members of the public to communicate electronically with Departments and for responses to be provided using the same medium.

Northern Ireland Civic Forum

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the membership, indicating which organisations members will be drawn from, and the role of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum. [50194]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Civic Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors and such other sectors as agreed by the First and Deputy Ministers of the new Northern Ireland Assembly. The Forum will act as a consultative body on social, economic and cultural issues.

Dementia

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of people suffering from dementia in Northern Ireland. [50219]

Mr. Worthington: Figures on the actual incidence of people with dementia are not available as many sufferers are not in contact with services. Based on surveys elsewhere of the prevalence of dementia within the population it is estimated that in Northern Ireland there could be some 13,500 people suffering from one or other of the various forms of the disease.

Central Community Relations Unit

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the organisations in receipt of funding from the Central Community Relations Unit in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996 and (iii) 1997, giving in each case the amount. [50190]

Mr. Worthington: The Central Community Relations Unit provided funding totalling £5,586,200.09 in 1995–96, £5,531,857.76 in 1996–97 and £5,627,728.91 in 1997–98. Details of the organisations funded in those years, together with the amount of funding they received, have been placed in the Library of the House. These do not include payments from the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund in respect of European Union Measures administered by the Central Community Relations Unit.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Women Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women sentenced to imprisonment in England and Wales in each of the last three years had children under the age of five years at the time of their sentence. [49525]

Ms Quin: This information is not collected centrally. However, a study of women in prison was carried out in November 1994 by the Office for National Statistics. It found that, of the 1,766 women interviewed, 265 (or 15 per cent.) had, at the time of imprisonment, at least one child under the age of five.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) which women's prison has the largest use per inmate of *(a)* chlorpromazine (Largactil), *(b)* Melleril and *(c)* other anti-psychotic drugs; how many were prescribed there; and what was the prison population there, in each of the last five years; [50178]

(2) how many prescriptions for *(a)* chlorpromazine (Largactil), *(b)* Melleril and *(c)* other anti-psychotic drugs were issued in each of the past five years in each women's prison; [50180]

(3) what changes have taken place in the prescription of *(a)* minor tranquillisers, *(b)* major tranquillisers and *(c)* neuroleptic drugs in women's prisons since the publication of the 1996 report of the Advisory Council on Drugs Misuse. [50179]

Ms Quin: Details about prescriptions issued are not available in a form that could be used to provide the information sought and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The Prison Service recognises that many women received into custody have complex medical histories and have very often already been prescribed the types of medications cited. A Prison Service health care standard on the use of medicines makes clear that medication will be prescribed only for clinical reasons and in line with the recommendation in the 1996 report from the Advisory Council on Drugs Misuse. Efforts are being made to reduce the prescribing of major and minor tranquillisers and neuroleptic drugs, except where their use is clinically essential. Increasing collaboration with NHS specialist psychiatric services is bringing prescribing in prisons under the influence of NHS consultant psychiatrists and concern about prescribing levels in prisons will continue to be addressed through improved monitoring of health care standards.

Police (Homosexuals)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps his Department has taken to encourage homosexual people to join police forces in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [49526]

Mr. Michael: The responsibility for making appointments to the police service in England and Wales lies with the chief constable of each police force. Chief constables, with the assistance of their police authorities, are also responsible for ensuring that their forces represent the community they serve. It is for individual chief constables to decide whether to target certain groups in any recruitment campaigns, and I am aware that a number of forces now place recruitment advertisements in gay newspapers and magazines.

It is important for the police force in any area to reflect the composition of the wider community it serves. This issue was explored in a thematic inspection undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary last year. The report "Winning the Race. Policing Plural Communities" was published last year and copies are available in the Library.

Prison Officers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give the total number and percentages of prison officers working with juveniles in young offender institutions and prisons by ethnic and religious background. [49872]

Ms Quin: These figures are not collated centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Drug Trafficking

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *347*, which of the initiatives listed were *(a)* initiated during the United Kingdom presidency and *(b)* in progress at the commencement of the United Kingdom presidency. [49993]

Mr. George Howarth: The new initiatives launched under the United Kingdom Presidency were:

- proposals and agreement on the key elements of a new European Union drugs strategy for 2000–04;
- the first two large-scale Customs joint surveillance exercises involving the 15 member states and the applicant countries of Central and Eastern Europe;
- introduction and completion of a joint action on good practice in mutual legal assistance;
- introduction of a joint action on the identification, tracing, freezing, seizing and confiscation of assets; and
- agreement to a common European Union standard for the exchange of fingerprint information.

The other activities listed in my earlier answer were taking forward important work, initiated by the United Kingdom and other member states, but not completed during previous Presidencies.

Police Officers

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total number of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* constables in each police force in England and Wales. [50865]

Mr. Michael: Provisional figures show that at 31 March 1998 there were 126,944 police officers (down 214 from March 1997) in England and Wales, including 98,387 constables (up 255 from March 1997).

The number of constables and the number of officers in each force is shown in the tables. In addition, there are 2,058 officers on secondments to the National Crime Squad and Central Services.

Change in constable strength between March 1997 and March 1998

	March 1997	*March 1998*	*Increase/ decrease*
England and Wales			
Avon and Somerset	2,314.8	2,307.9	−6.9
Bedfordshire	846.1	842.5	−3.6
Cambridgeshire	1,001.0	1,006.2	5.2
Cheshire	1,589.5	1,594.9	5.4
City of London	655.9	634.1	−21.8
Cleveland	1,121.5	1,146.4	24.9
Cumbria	881.5	910.5	29.0
Derbyshire	1,376.0	1,363.2	−12.8
Devon and Cornwall	2,233.5	2,322.9	89.4
Dorset	969.0	1,003.0	34.0
Durham	1,130.0	1,184.2	54.2
Dyfed-Powys	755.5	749.3	−6.2
Essex	2,269.3	2,263.5	−5.8
Gloucestershire	872.0	861.3	−10.7
Greater Manchester	5,341.9	5,415.5	73.6
Gwent	964.0	950.8	−13.2
Hampshire	2,698.2	2,736.8	38.6
Hertfordshire	1,364.5	1,328.1	−36.4
Humberside	1,582.4	1,565.4	−17.0
Kent	2,554.1	2,548.2	−5.9
Lancashire	2,492.5	2,504.3	11.8
Leicestershire	1,555.7	1,586.8	31.1
Lincolnshire	920.7	905.1	−15.6
Merseyside	3,272.4	3,293.4	21.0
Metropolitan Police	20,671.4	20,252.6	−418.8
Norfolk	1,133.3	1,115.2	−18.1
Northamptonshire	931.1	924.6	−6.5
Northumbria	2,885.0	2,960.9	75.9
North Wales	1,024.0	1,054.0	30.0
North Yorkshire	1,017.6	1,052.8	35.2
Nottinghamshire	1,821.9	1,831.0	9.1
South Wales	2,259.9	2,309.2	49.3
South Yorkshire	2,435.7	2,459.0	23.3
Staffordshire	1,683.9	1,781.9	98.0
Suffolk	921.7	927.2	5.5
Surrey	1,240.1	1,237.1	−3.0
Sussex	2,374.3	2,343.4	−30.9
Thames Valley	2,858.0	2,937.3	79.3
Warwickshire	707.9	724.1	16.2
West Mercia	1,563.1	1,553.9	−9.2
West Midlands	5,636.4	5,731.1	94.7
West Yorkshire	4,105.9	4,068.7	−37.2
Wiltshire	881.2	881.2	0.0
Total	96,914.4	97,169.5	255.1

Change in strength between March 1997 and March 1998

	March 1997	*March 1998*	*Increase/ decrease*
England and Wales			
Avon and Somerset	2,988.8	2,975.9	−12.9
Bedfordshire	1,093.6	1,078.5	−15.1
Cambridgeshire	1,302.0	1,291.4	−10.6
Cheshire	2,045.5	2,035.9	−9.6
City of London	858.9	824.9	−34.0
Cleveland	1,459.3	1,483.4	24.1
Cumbria	1,143.5	1,163.5	20.0
Derbyshire	1,790.6	1,772.2	−18.4
Devon and Cornwall	2,864.5	2,961.5	97.0
Dorset	1,284.0	1,310.0	26.0
Durham	1,460.5	1,514.8	54.3
Dyfed-Powys	1,004.5	1,002.3	−2.2
Essex	2,960.7	2,928.5	−32.2
Gloucestershire	1,132.6	1,103.9	−28.7
Greater Manchester	6,921.6	6,948.7	27.1
Gwent	1,243.0	1,232.8	−10.2
Hampshire	3,451.7	3,489.5	37.8
Hertfordshire	1,759.1	1,739.9	−19.2
Humberside	2,045.0	2,021.2	−23.8
Kent	3,260.1	3,251.8	−8.3
Lancashire	3,247.5	3,257.1	9.6
Leicestershire	1,948.8	1,983.1	34.3
Lincolnshire	1,196.4	1,191.1	−5.3
Merseyside	4,230.4	4,217.4	−13.0
Metropolitan Police	26,677.3	26,192.7	−484.6
Norfolk	1,431.6	1,429.6	−2.0
Northamptonshire	1,176.7	1,168.7	−8.0
Northumbria	3,676.8	3,766.7	89.9
North Wales	1,369.0	1,396.0	27.0
North Yorkshire	1,337.6	1,367.2	29.6
Nottinghamshire	2,323.4	2,322.6	−0.8
South Wales	2,975.9	2,986.2	10.3
South Yorkshire	3,158.7	3,182.0	23.3
Staffordshire	2,211.1	2,292.1	81.0
Suffolk	1,179.7	1,185.8	6.1
Surrey	1,619.5	1,608.4	−11.1
Sussex	3,084.9	3,037.7	−47.2
Thames Valley	3,695.0	3,775.5	80.5
Warwickshire	925.9	924.1	−1.8

Change in strength between March 1997 and March 1998

	March 1997	March 1998	Increase/ decrease
West Mercia	2,040.2	2,011.8	−28.4
West Midlands	7,112.7	7,156.5	43.8
West Yorkshire	5,208.8	5,154.7	−54.1
Wiltshire	1,154.3	1,148.3	−6.0
Total	125,051.7	124,885.9	−165.8

Police Complaints

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list each *(a)* successful and *(b)* unsuccessful case brought by members of the public against the police for (i) malicious prosecution, (ii) false imprisonment and (iii) assault in the last five years, giving in each case the amount of compensation paid. [50202]

Mr. Michael: The available information is in terms of numbers of substantial and unsubstantiated complaints against the police, and is given in the table. Figures for the amount of compensation paid are not available.

Outcomes of investigated complaints for certain complaint types

	Reason for complaint		
	Perjury/ irregularity in evidence	Unlawful/ unnecessary arrest/detention	Assault
1992			
Unsubstantiated[1]	n/a	n/a	n/a
Substantiated	25	76	99
1993			
Unsubstantiated	879	902	2,713
Substantiated	24	72	94
1994			
Unsubstantiated	448	801	2,516
Substantiated	22	61	82
1995/96			
Unsubstantiated	392	714	2,275
Substantiated	29	52	71
1996/97			
Unsubstantiated	542	940	2,852
Substantiated	21	67	94

[1] Figures for unsubstantiated complaints were not collected in this directorate prior to 1993 and we are unable to provide figures for 1992

Note:

Substantiated complaints plus unsubstantiated complaints represent the total number of complaints investigated. Substantiated complaints are those complaints against the police which are found justified by the Police Complaints Authority

Racial Crimes

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the recorded incidents of *(a)* racial assault, *(b)* racist murder and *(c)* incitement to racial hatred in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [50201]

Mr. Michael: Information is not available in precisely the form requested. At present, individual forces submit their total racial incidents figures to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary at the end of each financial year, on the basis of the Association of Chief Police Officers' definition of a racial incident:

"any incident in which it appears to the reporting or investigating officer that the complaint involves an element of racial motivation, or any incident which includes an allegation of racial motivation made by any person".

These statistics are not broken down by the type of incident. In consultation with the police, the Home Office is currently exploring the possibility of police forces submitting a breakdown of the type of racial incidents recorded by the police in the future.

The total number of racial incidents recorded by the police in England and Wales[1] from 1989 to 1996–97 is given in the table.

Year	England and Wales total
1989	5,044
1990	6,359
1991	7,882
1992	7,734
1993–94[2]	11,006
1994–95	11,878
1995–96	12,222
1996–97	13,151

[1] Figures are available from 1989 onwards

[2] Until 1993–94 figures were submitted to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary every calendar year.

In addition, under data collection requirements agreed by member states, figures giving the number of serious racial incidents have been submitted to the European Union since 1994. The 1994–95 figures showed that, of the 11,878 racial incidents recorded by the police in England and Wales, 508 were in respect of serious crime. Of these, four were murders; three were attempted murders; 161 were attacks involving explosives/arson; and 340 were serious assaults. In 1995–96, of the 12,222 racial incidents recorded by the police, 440 were in respect of serious crime. Of these, two were murders; 163 were attacks involving explosives/arson; and 275 were serious assaults. In 1996–97, of the 13,151 racial incidents recorded by the police, 414 were in respect of serious crime. Of these, three were murders; two were attempted murders; 158 were attacks involving explosives/arson; and 251 were serious assaults.

Ensuring that racial incidents are properly recorded and pursued is one aspect of the drive against racially aggravated crime. The Government intend to ensure that the criminal law is able to deal effectively with those involved in these incidents. The Crime and Disorder Bill *[Lords]* contains new racially aggravated offences which will send out a strong message that racist violence and harassment is unacceptable. It is also hoped that the Inquiry into the matters arising from the tragic death of Stephen Lawrence will identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crime.

Police (Clear-up Rates)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the clear-up rate for recorded offences in each police district in England and Wales in the last five years for which figures are available. [50199]

Mr. Michael: The available information relates to police force areas and is given in the table.

Notifiable offences recorded by the police: clear-up rate[1] by police force area England and Wales 1993–97

Percentage

Police force area	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Avon and Somerset	17	21	23	24	26
Bedfordshire	21	22	22	33	35
Cambridgeshire	25	25	19	24	27
Cheshire	26	30	31	34	36
Cleveland	27	19	25	24	25
Cumbria	38	37	40	36	40
Derbyshire	21	21	20	21	25
Devon and Cornwall	25	27	27	30	32
Dorset	33	30	28	27	29
Durham	30	32	30	30	31
Essex	32	36	33	29	27
Gloucestershire	20	24	27	23	24
Greater Manchester	34	34	24	17	20
Hampshire	26	27	28	28	30
Hertfordshire	21	24	28	30	32
Humberside	16	17	19	20	20
Kent	25	29	26	32	31
Lancashire	35	33	34	33	30
Leicestershire	28	30	29	31	34
Lincolnshire	37	32	39	42	48
London, City of	22	27	23	27	24
Merseyside	39	33	27	29	31
Metropolitan Police	17	22	25	23	25
Norfolk	28	34	31	32	37
Northamptonshire	27	31	28	34	35
Northumbria	20	22	23	24	26
North Yorkshire	30	25	23	25	26
Nottinghamshire	29	28	23	28	28
South Yorkshire	20	24	24	23	29
Staffordshire	29	31	32	34	35
Suffolk	37	35	34	33	37
Surrey	20	30	31	29	33
Sussex	24	24	28	29	26
Thames Valley	21	22	23	25	25
Warwickshire	21	24	25	24	27
West Mercia	29	29	28	26	28
West Midlands	27	25	24	23	24
West Yorkshire	18	20	21	24	27
Wiltshire	35	36	32	29	32
England	25	26	26	26	27
Dyfed-Powys	50	53	57	58	61
Gwent	45	47	50	50	51
North Wales	36	39	32	33	34
South Wales	28	24	29	32	36
Wales	34	32	34	37	41
England and Wales	25	26	26	26	28

[1] Excluding offences of "other criminal damage" of value £20 and under

Driving Offences

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many motorists were *(a)* charged with and *(b)* convicted of (i) failure to accord precedence at pedestrian crossings, (ii) failure to comply with traffic signs, (iii) speeding offences, (iv) driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs and (v) reckless driving in (1) the Metropolitan Police area of London and (2) England and Wales in (A) 1994, (B) 1995, (C) 1996 and (D) 1997. [50198]

Mr. Michael: Figures for the years 1994–96 are given in the table. Figures for 1997 are not yet available.

Number of proceedings and findings of guilt for certain motoring offences in England and Wales and the Metropolitan Police district 1994–96

	Metropolitan Police		England and Wales	
	Proceedings	Findings of guilt	Proceedings	Findings of guilt
1994				
Dangerous driving	1,310	529	11,097	6,194
Driving etc., after consuming alcohol or taking drugs	18,800	15,259	104,690	89,700
Speed limit offences	12,629	11,159	114,338	105,063
Failing to comply with traffic signals	6,770	5,080	29,152	24,266
Other offences of neglect of traffic directions[1]	2,214	1,455	12,306	8,770
Neglect of pedestrian rights[2]	3,593	2,770	9,209	7,439
1995				
Dangerous driving	1,254	569	10,906	6,408
Driving etc., after consuming alcohol or taking drugs	18,699	15,445	105,407	92,505
Speed limit offences	12,998	11,519	128,409	118,974
Failing to comply with traffic signals	7,121	5,471	29,695	24,480
Other offences of neglect of traffic directions[1]	2,594	1,795	10,706	7,596
Neglect of pedestrian rights[2]	3,174	2,385	8,643	6,898
1996				
Dangerous driving	987	457	10,017	5,750
Driving etc., after consuming alcohol or taking drugs	18,043	15,012	107,931	95,705
Speed limit offences	14,348	12,841	139,565	130,039
Failing to comply with traffic signals	6,874	5,446	30,220	25,307
Other offences of neglect of traffic directions[1]	2,553	1,823	9,320	6,672
Neglect of pedestrian rights[2]	2,714	2,008	8,132	6,487

[1] Includes failure to comply with the directions of a police constable as well as failure to comply with traffic signs

[2] Includes driving in a playstreet and other contraventions of street playground orders as well as offences connected with 'Zebra' crossings, 'Pelican' crossings and traffic lights at pedestrian crossings

Illegal Guns

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by police authority area the number of illegal guns that have been received over each of the last three years. [49897]

Mr. Michael: Information about illegal firearms received by individual forces is not normally collected centrally. During the national firearms amnesty in 1996, a total of 22,942 firearms were surrendered to forces as follows:

Police force	*Total number of firearms*
Avon and Somerset	878
Bedfordshire	173
Cambridgeshire	308
Cheshire	376
Cleveland	198
Cumbria	365
Derbyshire	337
Devon and Cornwall	1,110
Dorset	521
Durham	305
Essex	793
Gloucestershire	310
Greater Manchester	420
Hampshire	716
Hertfordshire	161
Humberside	259
Kent	588
Lancashire	504
Leicestershire	404
Lincolnshire	466
London, City of Merseyside	245
Metropolitan Police	1,056
Norfolk	605
Northampton	222
Northumbria	428
North Yorkshire	311
Nottinghamshire	512
South Yorkshire	352
Staffordshire	423
Suffolk	650
Surrey	368
Sussex	873
Thames Valley	864
Warwickshire	212
West Mercia	526
West Midlands	597
West Yorkshire	352
Wiltshire	445
Total England	18,239
Dyfed Powys	493
Gwent	110
North Wales	332
South Wales	340
Total Wales	1,275
Total England and Wales	19,514
Central Scotland	215
Dumfries and Galloway	285
Fife	307
Grampian	547
Lothian and Borders	497
Northern	368
Strathclyde	936
Tayside	273
Total Scotland	3,428
Total Great Britain	22,942

Ministerial Television Appearances

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of appearing on television programmes to discuss drugs matters. [50181]

Mr. George Howarth: Every request for interview is treated individually and on its merits.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Women's Unit

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* resources and *(b)* programme money was provided to the Women's Unit for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99. [45796]

Ms Ruddock: A new Women's Unit was established in this Department with effect from 6 May 1997. Five civil servants from the Sex and Race Equality Division of the Department for Education and Employment were transferred to this Department to establish the Unit together with an annual budget of £165,000. The actual expenditure for the Women's Unit for 1997–98 was £565,202.

The allocation made for the Women's Unit for the period 1998/99 is £1,130,004.

These higher figures demonstrate this Government's commitment to ensuring that there is an effective and adequately resourced Women's Unit to prioritise women's interests at the heart of Government.

The Women's Unit does not have a programme budget of its own, although its work does, of course, influence the programmes of Government Departments.

Lone Parents

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents are claiming income support in each local authority area in London; and in each area, how many lone parents had one or more children aged *(a)* 0 to four and *(b)* five to 11 years; and how many children of lone parents fall into each age group. [48979]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The latest information available is set out in the table.

Lone parents receiving Income Support in Greater London, November 1996

Thousands

	All lone parents receiving Income Support	*Lone parents with child(ren under 5*		*Lone parents with child(ren) aged 5–11*	
		Cases	*Children*	*Cases*	*Children*
City of London	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Barking & Dagenham	5	2	3	3	4
Barnet	5	2	3	3	4
Bexley	4	2	3	2	3
Brent	8	4	5	5	6
Bromley	4	2	2	2	3
Camden	6	2	3	3	5
Croydon	8	4	5	5	7
Ealing	7	3	4	4	6
Enfield	7	3	4	4	6
Greenwich	8	4	5	4	6
Hackney	9	4	5	6	8
Hammersmith & Fulham	5	3	3	3	3
Haringey	8	4	5	5	6
Harrow	3	1	2	2	3
Havering	4	2	2	2	2
Hillingdon	5	2	3	3	4
Hounslow	5	2	3	3	4
Islington	7	3	4	4	6
Kensington & Chelsea	3	1	2	1	2
Kingston upon Thames	2	1	1	1	1
Lambeth	11	6	7	7	9
Lewisham	9	5	6	5	8
Merton	3	2	2	2	3
Newham	11	6	7	6	9
Redbridge	4	2	3	2	3
Richmond upon Thames	2	[1]—	[1]—	1	1
Southwark	11	5	6	6	9
Sutton	3	1	2	2	3
Tower Hamlets	7	3	4	4	6
Waltham Forest	7	3	4	4	6
Wandsworth	6	3	4	3	4
City of Westminster	4	2	2	2	3
Greater London (Total)	187	92	112	107	151

[1] Denotes nil or negligible

Notes:

1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand. Totals may not sum due to rounding
2. Lone parents are defined as claimants receiving the lone parent premium and will therefore exclude some single parents who receive a higher value premium such as the Disability or Pensioner premium
3. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample
4. A lone parent may have children in both of the age bands shown. They will therefore be counted twice, as such a case will be shown in each banding

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Inquiry, November 1996 (latest available)

Unclaimed Pensions

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many women did not claim their state pension on reaching the age of 60 in the year 1997–98; [49079]

(2) how many men did not claim the state pension on reaching the age of 65 years in 1997–98. [49100]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available. Information for 1995–96 on the number of men and women who have entitlement to Retirement Pension (RP) and have contacted the Department to say that they wish to defer claiming their pension is set out in the table.

Number of pensioners not claiming their RP

	Men aged 65 years	*Women aged 60 years*
Deferred claim	3,000	3,000

Source:

The Lifetime Labour Market Database (LLMDB), a 1 per cent. sample of the National Insurance Recording System taken at February 1997. Analyses cover Great Britain and numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand

Pensioners

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will provide a breakdown of the sums available to pensioners who have not claimed their

income support, indicating the number within the ranges *(a)* 0 to 50 pence, *(b)* 50 pence to £1, *(c)* £1 to £2 and *(d)* measured in £1 steps, up to £55 per week. [49650]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

Number of pensioner benefit units not claiming entitlement to income support by amount unclaimed in 1995–96

000s

Band	*Number of pensioners*
£0-£1	60
£1.01-£2	60
£2.01-£3	50
£3.01-£4	40[1]
£4.01-£5	60
£5.01-£6	50
£6.01-£7	80
£7.01-£8	50
£8.01-£9	50
£9.01-£10	[1]30
£10.01-£11	[1]30
£11.01-£12	50
£12.01-£13	120
£13.01-£23	70
£23.01-£33	[1]40
£33.01-£43	70
£43.01-£53	50
£53.01-High	60
Total	1,010

[1] The estimates are based on particularly small sample sizes and should be treated with caution

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 and may not sum due to rounding. The estimates are based on the 1995–96 FRS and are almost certainly subject to some degree of error
2. The median unclaimed amount is £9.10: 50 per cent. of pensioners are therefore entitled to less than this amount and 50 per cent. are entitled to more
3. It has not been possible to provide figures in 50 pence bands up to £1, or figures in £1 bands above £13 because the amounts in the sample size are too small. The table therefore shows £10 bands above £13, up to £53
4. The term "pensioner benefit unit" refers to a single pensioner over the age of 60—with or without dependent children—or a couple (married or unmarried) together with any dependent children, whether either partner is over the age of 60

Source:

Family Resources Survey (FRS) 1995–96

Benefits Agency Medical Service

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make it her policy that the contract to operate the Benefits Agency Medical Service will not be transferred to a private company until that company can demonstrate that it has a sufficient medical workforce to execute the contract as demonstrated by signed and returned contracts between the accredited medical workforce and the company. [49695]

Mr. Keith Bradley: It was announced on 19 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *861–62*, that the contracts for Benefits Agency Medical Service would be awarded to the SEMA Group for five years with an option to extend the contracts for two years.

One of the acceptance criteria to be used to determine whether responsibility for providing the medical services is transferred to a private company is that a pool of suitably qualified and approved doctors is in place to deliver the service.

Residential Homes

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security whether the preserved right benefits of persons living in independent sector residential homes can be reduced as a result of topping up payments from a local authority; and what plans she has to change the current rules. [49996]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Local authorities are permitted to top up Income Support paid to people with preserved rights only in cases where a person was receiving local authority topping up payments on 31 March 1993, is under pension age, or is in residential care and either facing eviction from the home or is resident of a home which is about to close. Such top-up payments have no effect on the amount of Income Support paid. We have no plans to change the rules on the treatment of such payments.

Widows Benefits

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will introduce measures to allow women to qualify for widows benefit when they have not been married to their late partners but could qualify as having been married by cohabitation. [50210]

Mr. Denham: Modernising the Social Security system is a key priority of the Government. In our examination of the current Social Security structure we will take account of the needs of the bereaved in pursuit of our aim of reducing poverty and welfare dependency, promoting work incentives and providing better, simpler more efficient services to clients.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cold weather payments were made; and how much was spent on cold weather payments in the winter of 1997–98. [50211]

Mr. Denham: Last winter, 55,381 Cold Weather Payments were made, totalling £470,739.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she intends to reply to the letters to her dated 7 April, 27 April and 4 June from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. P. Hampson of 2 Hopterstall Walk. [50559]

Mr. Field: A reply was sent to my right hon. Friend on 13 July 1998.

LETS Schemes

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of (i) the number of LETS schemes and (ii) the number of people trading in LETS in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Derbyshire; and if she will make a statement. [50203]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information requested is not collected by this Department.

Benefits Appeals

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals, in respect of each benefit, were successful during the last 12 months where the claimant *(a)* had an oral hearing and was represented, *(b)* had an oral hearing and was not represented and *(c)* did not attend the hearing. [50182]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is set out in the table.

Number of oral tribunal hearings where the appellant was successful and was represented, was not represented and did not attend

Type of benefit	*Was represented*[1]	*Was not represented and attended alone*	*Did not attend hearing*[2]
All	21,132	15,543	6,784
Attendance Allowance	23	11	5
Child Benefit	53	63	66
Compensation Recovery Unit	3	2	0
Disablement Benefit	783	219	48
Disability Living Allowance	57	12	11
Disability Working Allowance	12	7	3
Family Credit	108	120	158
Guardians Allowance	0	1	0
Incapacity Benefit (IB):			
Not all work test	486	499	266
All work test	12,288	8,008	1,476
All work test (excl. IB)	2,243	2,051	580
Income Support	3,176	2,683	1,923
Industrial Death Benefit	0	0	0
Invalid Care Allowance	77	46	45
Invalidity Benefit (IVB)	151	51	16
IVB (Graham)[1]	1	0	0
Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA):			
JSA (hardship)	4	8	8
JSA (labour market)	129	379	798
JSA (payment)	226	365	479
Maternity Allowance	1	0	0
Maternity Benefit	1	4	3
One Parent Benefit	3	7	5
Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema	0	0	0
Reduced Earnings Allowance	16	5	0
Retirement Pension	29	20	20
Severe Disablement Allowance	62	38	18
SDA (foster)[1]	582	9	79
Sickness Benefit	25	12	5
Social Fund:			
Funeral payment	189	201	182
Maternity payment	6	13	15
Statutory Maternity Pay	2	1	0
Statutory Sick Pay	1	2	1
Supplementary Benefit:			
Single payment	9	5	4
Other payments[1]	35	2	6

Number of oral tribunal hearings where the appellant was successful and was[1] represented, was not represented and did not attend

Type of benefit	*Was represented*[1]	*Was not represented and attended alone*	*Did not attend hearing*[2]
Unemployment Benefit	250	650	543
Widows Benefit	25	17	15
Workmen's Compensation	0	0	0
Others	75	32	6

[1] Lookalike cases

[2] Oral hearings where the representative only, or the appellant and the representative attended.

Notes:

1. Oral hearings where no-one attended. These figures do not include "paper determinations".
2. The period covered is 1 October 1996 to 30 September 1997.

Source:

The quarterly Social Security Appeal Tribunal Statistics published by DSS Analytical Services Divisions.

Supported Accommodation (Interim Funding)

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement about the future of the interim funding arrangements for supported accommodation from the end of October. [50751]

Ms Harman: I am pleased to announce that the Government will be extending for a further twelve months our interim funding arrangements for supported accommodation.

The Government fully appreciate the importance of supported housing for vulnerable people. Extending the interim scheme will ensure financial security for many thousands of tenants who rely on Housing Benefit to meet the cost of the support services they need and which allow them to live with some measure of independence in the community.

We hope to conclude the inter-Departmental Review of funding for supported accommodation in the near future. However, the supported housing sector is a complex area and the problems identified by the Review have proved to be particularly difficult to resolve. The Government remain committed to identifying and introducing appropriate long-term funding arrangements as soon as possible.

The Government believe that it is important to ensure that whatever arrangements are implemented for the long-term, they are sustainable and achieve a fair balance between the demands on Housing Benefit and other sources of funding. We will give supported housing providers and other stakeholders an opportunity to comment before new arrangements are implemented.

Next Steps Agencies

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she will publish the 1997–98 annual reports and accounts for each of her Next Steps agencies. [50750]

Ms Harman: The 1997/98 annual reports and accounts have been laid before Parliament today for the Benefits, Child Support, Contributions, Information Technology Services and War Pensions Agencies.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Library

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are the annual revenue account costs of the British Library's new public affairs directorate. [40132]

Mr. Fisher: The Public Affairs Directorate was established in 1996 with staff from existing resources. Annual revenue costs of the Directorate in 1997–98 were:

	£
Income from sales and donations	2,158,972
Expenditure	3,510,157
Net Expenditure	1,351,185

Departmental Staff (Scotland)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many staff are employed in Scotland by his Department, or executive agencies responsible to his Department; and where those staff are located. [48359]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Royal Parks Agency do not employ any staff in Scotland.

Historic Buildings (Cheltenham)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to publish the new list of buildings of historic or architectural interest for the Borough of Cheltenham. [49245]

Mr. Banks: The Cheltenham list is one of 140 which have been reviewed by English Heritage. The responsibility for checking, processing and agreeing these revised lists lies within the Department. This, together with the resolution of queries with English Heritage, is a time consuming task. We are about to start work on the Cheltenham list which includes over 1,000 buildings and expect to publish it before the end of November.

Local Authority Sports Strategies

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to encourage local authorities to develop sports strategies. [50232]

Mr. Banks: The Department is working with local government to develop guidance on cultural strategies embracing all areas of its responsibility, including sport. The English Sports Council has also produced a wide range of strategic guidance intended to assist local authorities and other bodies involved in planning for sport, both in terms of building facilities and sports development programmes.

Outdoor Sports

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to encourage participation in outdoor sports. [50235]

Mr. Banks: Through our policy of 'Sport For All', we are determined to encourage and improve participation in all sports.

Government support for sport is channelled through the Sports Councils. In 1998–99 almost £45 million of exchequer funding will be made available to the United Kingdom Sports Council and the English Sports Council. In addition, around £250 million will be awarded to sport through the Lottery Sports Fund.

With this funding, the Sports Councils undertake a range of activities to promote and develop a number of sports at all levels. The Sports Councils aim to support both indoor and outdoor sports when giving grants to sports governing bodies or making awards from the Lottery Sports Fund.

Sports Governing Bodies

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to improve the financial accountability of sports governing bodies. [50233]

Mr. Banks: This Department's funding for sport is channelled through the United Kingdom and English Sports Councils. The Sports Councils make decisions on awards to sports governing bodies and must ensure that organisations in receipt of funding are administered in an efficient manner and have rigorous financial controls in place. The Councils are required to give assurances to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to this effect.

The Councils carry out an audit programme of governing bodies to monitor performance. In addition, the Councils undertake advice and support activities, including conferences, seminars and workshops to help with corporate governance, financial planning and objective setting.

Sports Administration and Coaching

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to improve standards in sports *(a)* administration and *(b)* coaching. [50236]

Mr. Banks: In addition to audit work, the English Sports Council, which is funded by my Department, seeks to improve standards in the general administration of sport through its Running Sport programme. The programme offers courses and guidance material across a wide range of sports management and administration issues. The programme has been developed and delivered in partnership with a wide range of organisations, including governing bodies and local authorities. The ESC's Volunteer Investment Programme also includes training and advice on administration and management issues for the many volunteer officials and coaches who help run sport at all levels. 2,800 volunteer managers benefited from training in 1997–98. The ESC also keeps in regular contact with the British Institute for Sports Administration and collaborates with it on specific projects.

The United Kingdom and the English Sports Councils are providing £2.261 million in grant-aid to the National Coaching Foundation (NCF) during the current financial year. I am pleased that the Councils are continuing to support the NCF's work in providing education,

instruction, and training to professional and volunteer coaches at all levels of British sport. Around half the ESC's £1.561 million grant to the NCF will be used to support two major projects under the ESC's National Junior Sport Programme: the Champion Coaching Scheme which seeks to recruit and train more coaches for young people; and, Coaching for Teachers, by which over 8,500 primary and secondary teachers will be given the opportunity to develop their coaching skills in 12 different sports. The United Kingdom Sports Council has been working closely with the NCF in particular to ensure that the needs of elite athletes and their coaches are properly met.

Boxing

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to reduce potential damage caused by blows to the head in boxing in the United Kingdom. [50257]

Mr. Banks: While I appreciate the interest boxing creates, the Government are keen to see that the proper medical safeguards and regulations are in place for all sports. It is especially important for those who carry a higher level of physical contact, and believe that the sport's governing bodies are well equipped to keep these in place. The British Boxing of Control are currently undertaking a further review of their medical and safety procedures and have sought views from all their members across the country. I have requested a full report on the outcome.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Royal Train

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the sleeping car on the Royal Train will be made available for hire. [49524]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Yes. For Governmental and other uses to further the national interest. Up to four sleeping cars, together with the rest of the Royal Train would be available. The four coaches used by The Queen, The Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales would not be available for alternate use.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *696*, during which period is the wider set of cross-system and cross-site year 2000 validation tests for the NATS systems expected to take place. [49864]

Dr. Strang: Cross-system and cross-site year 2000 validation testing on NATS systems is due to take place in the period September to December 1998.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *696*, if he will make a statement on the progress of the independent audit of the NATS year 2000 activities. [49865]

Dr. Strang: The initial stage of the independent audit has been conducted and a report was produced in early May. Agreed recommendations are now being implemented. Further audit stages are due to be conducted at approximately 3 month intervals.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *696*, how many of the 99 NATS software items found to be Year 2000 non-compliant have been fixed; and what is the expected completion date for the fixing and testing of these changes. [49863]

Dr. Strang: By the end of July 1998, remedial work on 79 of the 99 non-compliant operational systems and equipment will have been completed. The plan remains to have all non-compliant items fixed and tested by the end of December 1998.

Safer Routes to School Initiatives

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding his Department will be providing for local authority Safe Routes to School initiatives in Gloucestershire. [50058]

Dr. Strang: Funds are not normally earmarked for "Safer Routes to School" initiatives. In the 1998–99 Local Transport Capital Settlement, my Department allocated Gloucestershire County Council £700,000 for minor works in Cheltenham and Gloucester package areas. The Council has the freedom to use these resources for Safer Routes to School if it wishes.

As bids for funding 1999–2000 are not due until the end of this month it is too early to say how much Gloucestershire will have at its disposal for Safer Routes to School in that year.

Capital Expenditure

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the public capital expenditure on transport by English region on a per capita basis *(a)* for the last five years and *(b)* as a forecast for the next three years. [49862]

Dr. Strang: The information my hon. Friend has requested for the past five years cannot be produced comprehensively except at unreasonable cost to public funds. There are forecasts for the future pattern of the expenditure in question. I shall write to my hon. Friend.

Organophosphates

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) of 22 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *530*, who is carrying out the research into the effects of low-level exposure to organophosphate pesticides on human health; where this research is being carried out; what is the total value of the funding; and if the Chemical Defence Establishment put in a proposal and bid for this research funding. [49994]

Mr. Meacher: The main contractor for the research is the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh. Part of the study has involved visits to farms throughout Great

Britain. In addition, some clinical work has been carried out by the Institute of Neurological Sciences at Glasgow. The total value of the funding is £500,000, jointly provided by the Health and Safety Executive, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Health. The Chemical Defence Establishment did not put in a proposal or bid.

Air Passengers (Behaviour)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of incidents in the air related to disruptive behaviour and drunkenness reported to the CAA under the mandatory reporting system in each of the last five years. [50217]

Dr. Strang: The number of incidents reported under the mandatory reporting system related to disruptive behaviour and drunkenness, which are considered relevant to flight safety.

Year	*Number*
1993	13
1994	32
1995	36
1996	68
1997	62

Council Tax

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects to make a decision regarding the creation of additional council tax bands; and if he will make a statement; [50439]

(2) when he next proposes to review properties in relation to their council tax banding; and if he will make a statement. [50440]

Mr. Raynsford: Our consultation paper 'Improving local financial accountability' invited views on whether there is a case to change the council tax. The deadline for responses was 1 June. We have received a number of representations about the council tax bands. We are considering these and will set out our conclusions in a White Paper this summer.

Water Disconnections

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many water disconnections at domestic properties there have been in each year since 1993. [50183]

Angela Eagle: The Director General of Water Services publishes data on disconnections twice a year, by water company area, for both household and non-household customers. Information about disconnections in the year to 31 March 1998, together with numbers of household and non-household disconnections in each year since 1989–90, was published in an OFWAT News Release on 14 May 1998. Copies of this and earlier OFWAT News Releases containing similar information are in the House Library.

Private Roads

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the number of private roads in England. [50184]

Dr. Strang: Separate figures for England are not readily available. Records show that in 1972—the latest year for which figures exist—there were some 40,000 private streets throughout England and Wales, amounting to some 4,500 miles. The number will have declined since that time, but as records of streets made up for adoption are not held centrally it is not possible to say by how much.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the statutory duties of the owners of private roads with regard to their upkeep and lighting. [50185]

Dr. Strang: In general, the responsibility of maintaining a private street falls to the owners of the adjoining properties (the "frontagers"). This is a matter of common law, rather than statute law, although under the Highways Act 1980 when there is an urgent need for repairs to obviate danger to traffic the local highway authority may by notice require the owners of the premises fronting the street to carry out specified repairs. The authority may also from time to time resolve to execute street works in order to make up the street to a standard they consider satisfactory, and the works may include lighting.

The common law imposes no obligations on frontagers to light streets, and while local authorities have certain statutory powers in respect of lighting there is no duty to light a private street.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities in England and Wales to which he has given consent to make registration schemes for houses in multiple occupation which vary from the model schemes prescribed in Circular 3/97; and which of the consents given were for *(a)* information schemes and *(b)* schemes containing control provisions. [50186]

Mr. Raynsford: HMO registration schemes which vary from the model schemes prescribed in Circular 3/97 have been confirmed for the following authorities in England:

Notification schemes

North East Lincolnshire

York City

Schemes containing control provisions

Barnsley

Colchester

Ealing

Guildford

Hackney

Hounslow

Islington

Kings Lynn and West Norfolk

Schemes containing special control provisions

Blackpool

Bournemouth

Portsmouth

Thanet.

In addition, my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has confirmed one scheme containing special control provisions for Swansea.

Bull Bars

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to ban bull bars on vehicles. [50253]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Last year we consulted on a range of possible options for dealing with bull bars at a national level. Having carefully considered the responses to this exercise, we are now in the process of identifying how best to take matters forward. We are keen to see aggressive bull bars off the road, but we must ensure that any action we take deals effectively with the complexities involved.

Strand Underpass

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total cost for each of the past 10 years of the Strand Underpass in respect of *(a)* capital costs and *(b)* maintenance works. [50359]

Dr. Strang: The City of Westminster is entirely responsible for the Strand Underpass. However, the following data on capital and maintenance expenditure have been obtained from that authority.

Strand underpass expenditure

£000

Year	*Capital*	*Maintenance*[1]
1988–89	83.098	302.697
1989–90	304.870	204.818
1990–91	2,535.137	229.923
1991–92	1,648.203	284.790
1992–93	105.802	129.945
1993–94	129.478	115.490
1994–95	406.741	117.861
1995–96	0	109.269
1996–97	0	128.545
1997–98	0	113.199

[1] These do not include routine costs for cleansing and carriageway relining

Global Warming

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his latest estimate of the level of global warming for the current year relative to the average for the period 1951 to 1980. [50361]

Angela Eagle: Global temperatures recorded during the first six months of 1998 have been analysed and show that temperatures averaged from January to June have been 0.64 degrees Celsius warmer than the average measured for those six months during the period 1951 to 1980. A major contributor to this warmth has been the El Nino phenomenon. The Government do not, however, make forecasts of the average global temperature for the remainder of the current year.

Herald Way Marsh

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many species of plants and animals are indigenous to the Herald Way marsh in Coventry; and of those, how many are classified as endangered. [50120]

Angela Eagle: Over 1,142 species of plant and animal have been recorded at Herald Way marsh. The figure breaks down as follows:

250 species of plant

848 species of invertebrate

4 species of amphibian and reptile

over 40 species of bird

a range of common mammals.

The site supports an important assemblage of invertebrates, including 3 species that are classified as Rare or Vulnerable nationally, and 79 species classified as notable (considered scarce on a national scale).

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many species of animals, plants and insects there are *(a)* in Herald Way marsh and *(b)* on average in other sites of special scientific interest in England. [50122]

Angela Eagle: 1,142 species of animal, plant and invertebrate have been recorded at Herald Way marsh. For a breakdown of the figures I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to the previous question.

Species lists for all 3,995 SSSIs in England are not held and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of water quality in Herald Way marsh; and what proportion of the impurities found comes from *(a)* industrial and *(b)* agricultural sources. [50123]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency, which is responsible for monitoring water quality, is not aware of any direct industrial or agricultural sources of pollution of the Herald Way marsh. The land beneath the marsh is, however, contaminated by longstanding deposits of colliery waste. Leachability tests have indicated that the contaminants are relatively immobile and therefore pose a negligible risk to the environment if left in-situ. Since construction activity could disturb the contaminants, the Agency has asked the local planning authority to request detailed assessment of the environmental implications of all proposed developments in the area.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the mechanisms currently used to prevent activities that damage sites of special scientific interest; what duties are placed on public bodies to protect sites of special scientific interest; and what powers agencies have to monitor sites of special scientific interest. [50124]

Angela Eagle: There are a variety of consultation mechanisms, both between the conservation agency and landowners and between the agencies and other bodies, which serve to highlight potential problems and enable the conservation agencies to take action to remedy them, and prevent damage.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many sites of special scientific interest are located in industrial or urban areas of *(a)* England and *(b)* the United Kingdom. [50119]

Angela Eagle: This information is not readily available in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures the Government are taking to restore sites of special scientific interest that have been damaged by long-term pollution. [50121]

Angela Eagle: It is not the Government's responsibility to restore sites damaged by long-term pollution. In most cases, the owner is expected to take responsibility for the restoration of a site. However, several statutory regimes exist providing measures for the remediation of damage caused by long-term pollution, including damage in SSSIs. Section 161 of the Water Resources Act 1991, and section 161A when implemented, give considerable powers to the Environment Agency to deal with pollution of controlled waters. Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, when implemented, will give enforcing authorities new powers to secure remediation of contaminated land, as defined. SSSIs are proposed to be specifically included amongst the receptors to be considered when determining whether land meets the definition.

Drinking Water Inspectorate

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the eighth Annual report of the Drinking Water Inspectorate will be published. [50748]

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the eighth annual report of the Drinking Water Inspectorate will be published. [50813]

Mr. Meacher: The Drinking Water Inspectorate has published its eighth Annual Report today.

The Inspectorate will also publish leaflets for consumers. One will summarise the main points of the Report and the others will give brief details of the quality of drinking water supplied by each water company.

Copies of the Report and leaflets will be placed in the Library of the House.

Urban Development Corporations

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department's research on the impact of urban development corporations will be published. [50752]

Mr. Caborn: The results of two evaluations of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) were published today, one examining the "Performance and Good Practice Lessons of UDCs" and the other the "Impact of UDCs in Leeds, Bristol and Central Manchester". Copies of each report and summary of findings have been placed in the Library of the House. The Department's evaluation of the LDDC, "Regenerating London Docklands" was published in June. These reports, taken together, represent a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of UDCs and set out good practice lessons for future regeneration agencies.

Housing (Rents)

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the implications for local authority rents of the figures announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer today for expenditure on housing revenue account subsidy included in the total of annually managed expenditure. [50864]

Ms Armstrong: The provision for Housing Revenue Account Subsidy allows for a real increase in local authority rents of 1 per cent. next year and of 2 per cent. in each of the following two years. The consequent increase in rental income net of increased rent rebates will be available for increased revenue expenditure on maintaining the stock. The detailed proposals for the determination of HRA subsidy for 1999–2000 and subsequent years will be subject to consultation in the usual way. Rent policy for the longer term remains under consideration within the Welfare Reform process.

Roads Review

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the proposed Junction 8 of the M62 is included in the Roads Review. [50197]

Dr. Strang: No. The Commission for the New Towns have agreed to fund this scheme. Schemes like this which are to be funded by developers are excluded from the Review as explained in my Answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Mr. Whitehead) on 19 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *278–79*. This answer corrects the one given by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State on 12 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *62*.

M25

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the implications of the recent proposal for widening the M25 for growth in *(a)* traffic and *(b)* carbon dioxide emissions; [47988]

(2) if he will make a statement on the environmental impact of the recent proposal for widening the M25; [47987]

(3) if he will make a statement on the cost of the recent proposal for widening the M25. [47986]

Dr. Strang: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Tom Brake, dated 14 July 1998:

The Transport Minister, Glenda Jackson, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the M25.

There are three sets of proposals to widen the M25 between Junctions 12–15, Junctions 15–16 and Junctions 16–19. All three are being considered in the Government's review of the role that trunk roads should play in an integrated transport system.

The schemes are described broadly in Vol 2 of the roads review consultation document—a copy of the relevant page is attached—but until we know the outcome of the review, we cannot say what form the proposals will take if indeed Ministers decide to take the schemes forward. I am afraid I cannot therefore provide the information you seek. The Government hopes to announce the results of the roads review this summer.

We are also considering proposals to improve safety on the eastbound approach to M25 J6, but these proposals are at too early a stage for us to be able to provide the information you ask for.

M25 J12–15 widening

Standard D5/D6

Scheme cost £93.8 million

Length 10.9km

Next Stage OM

Widening of the M25 in Surrey between Junction 12 (the junction with the M3) and Junction 15 (the junction with the M4). The scheme is to widen within the highway boundary from dual 4 lane to dual 5 lane between Junctions 12 and 14 and from dual 4 lane to dual 6 lane between Junction 14 and 15. This section of the M25 connects with the M3, M4, A30 and provides access via A3113 to Heathrow Airport. The M25 is part of the Trans European Road Network.

M25 J15–16 widening

Standard D5

Scheme cost £43.1 million

Length 7.5km

Next Stage OP

Widening of the M25 between Junction 15 (M4) and Junction 16 (M40) from dual 4 lane to dual 5 lane standard largely within the existing highway boundary. The M25 is part of the Trans European Road Network. The scheme's objective is to provide additional capacity.

M25 J16–19 widening

Standard D4

Scheme cost £94.4 million

Length 16.0km

Next Stage OM

Widening of the M25 between Junction 16 (M40) and Junction 19 (the Watford Spur) from D3 to D4 standard within the existing highway boundary. The scheme's objective is to provide additional traffic capacity. The scheme has been identified for review to establish whether a smaller scale solution could be adopted.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Drugs Tsar

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Council on the basis of how many days work per week the salary of the Drugs Tsar is calculated. [50486]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator is employed as a Special Adviser, and under the terms of his contract is required to work a minimum of 41 hours over a 5-day week. Mr. Hellawell also has a position as a non-executive director with a property company, *Evans of Leeds*. The appointment was approved by the Cabinet Office on the basis that there was no conflict of interest and that the commitment was limited to attending six Board meetings a year, which would be taken out of his annual leave. Mr. Hellawell has waived the salary offered by *Evans of Leeds*.

Lobbyists

Sir George Young: To ask the President of the Council on what occasions *(a)* she, *(b)* the Lord Privy Seal and *(c)* their special advisers have met representatives of (i) GPC Market Access, (ii) Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn and (iii) GJW Government Relations since 1 May 1997; who these representatives were; and what was discussed at the meetings. [50558]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Ministers, their Special Advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed one of the specific functions of Special Advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention it is not the practice of Governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available, a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

WALES

Local Government Finance

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many capital grants and for what purpose the former Rhuddlan Borough Council received under the former Clwyd Integrated Development Operations Programme in the last 10 years of its existence; and which have final grant claims currently outstanding. [49323]

Mr. Hain: The Clwyd Integrated Development Operations Programme operated only for the period 1989–91. Projects which were approved under it including those for which final grant claims are still outstanding are:

Clwyd 1989–91

£

Project title	*Approved*	*Grant paid*	*Amount outstanding*
Sky Tower West Promenade	371,250	371,250.00	0
Rhyl Town Hall Area Improvements	210,000	210,000.00	0
Morley Road Car Park Landscaping	52,000	52,000.00	0
Small Industrial Units	145,000	137,750.00	7,250
West Promenade Car Park	1,793,694	1,793,694.00	0
New Pavilion Theatre	1,876,552	1,876,552.00	0
Morfa Clwyd Enterprise Centre	30,000	30,000.00	0
Fisherman's Cottages	53,324	50,657.80	2,666
Rhyl High Street Pedestrianisation	157,403	149,532.85	7,870

Gwent Tertiary College

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 3 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 292, for what reasons substantive replies were not given to earlier questions by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent on Gwent Tertiary College, prior to the establishment of the two investigations. [49866]

Mr. Hain: I have sought to provide my hon. Friend with the answers to his questions on approval, payments and procedures over a prolonged period. I have also written to him on 19 May and 1 June about these matters and have offered to meet him to discuss it. Until now he has declined to take up my offer but I understand he is to join other hon. Members at a meeting that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have arranged for 16 July. I hope that this will provide him with the opportunity to raise any outstanding issues that still concern him.

TREASURY

Child Care Tax Credit

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance has been issued to local authorities in respect of the introduction of the child care tax credit. [48981]

Mrs. Liddell: The child care tax credit will be an integral part of the Working Families Tax Credit, which will be introduced in October 1999 and administered by the Inland Revenue. Work is continuing on the detailed design of the WFTC and its administration. We will be considering what guidance about the WFTC needs to be issued, and to whom, at the appropriate time.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *178*, on the working families tax credit, if he will set out in each case the effect of the proposed reform on the number of people receiving *(a)* housing benefit and *(b)* council tax benefit. [49272]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* The introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit will lead to 50,000 fewer families receiving Housing Benefit, and about 90,000 fewer families receiving Council Tax Benefit.

These figures are consistent with those published in the FSBR. They assume 1997–98 caseload and take-up rates.

Hypothermia

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each of the years 1986 to 1996 the number of deaths in North Cumbria as a result of hypothermia. [49734]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Eric Martlew, dated 14 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the number of deaths in North Cumbria as a result of hypothermia in each year from 1986 to 1996.

The information is shown in the table below.

Deaths with a mention of hypothermia, North Cumbria, 1986–96

Year	*Deaths*
1986	7
1987	10
1988	2
1989	2
1990	3
1991	4
1992	1
1993	9
1994	2
1995	6
1996	7

The data for 1986 to 1992 are the numbers of deaths registered in those years, whereas the deaths from 1993 to 1996 are those that *occurred* in each year.

Prior to 1994, North Cumbria did not exist as a district health authority and the data for years 1986–93 were obtained by adding the number of deaths registered in the two district health authorities of East Cumbria and West Cumbria.

Winter Mortality Rates

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the excess winter mortality rates in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales, *(e)* Greater London and *(f)* Sutton and Cheam for each of

the last five years in terms of (i) numbers and (ii) percentages for (1) those aged 65 to 80 years, (2) those aged over 80 years and (3) all ages. [49552]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 14 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question on excess winter mortality rates in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Wales, *(e)* Greater London and *(f)* Sutton and Cheam for each of the last five years in terms of (i) numbers and (ii) percentages for (1) those aged 65 to 80 years, (2) those aged over 80 years and (3) all ages.

The information is given in the attached table.

Data are not available by parliamentary constituency. The table therefore gives figures for the London Borough of Sutton and separately for the wards of Cheam South and Cheam West combined. However, these two wards are actually combined within the London Borough of Sutton.

Excess Winter Deaths are defined as the number of deaths in the four months from December to March minus the average of the numbers in the preceding autumn (August-November) and the following summer (April-July).

The Excess Winter Deaths Index is the number of excess winter deaths expressed as a percentage of the average of the number of deaths in the autumn and the summer periods.

	1992–93		*1993–94*		*1994–95*		*1995–96*		*1996–97*[1]	
	Excess winter deaths	*Excess winter deaths index*	*Excess winter deaths*	*Excess winter deaths index*	*Excess winter deaths*	*Excess winter deaths index*	*Excess winter deaths*	*Excess winter deaths index*	*Excess winter deaths*	*Excess winter deaths index*
United Kingdom										
All ages	28,810	14.3	29,120	14.0	30,270	15.1	44,760	22.3	52,270	26.8
65–79	9,590	12.0	8,960	11.1	10,070	13.1	14,930	19.8	15,730	21.4
80 and over	16,730	19.8	17,640	19.7	17,700	20.2	26,650	30.0	32,950	38.2
England										
All ages	24,190	14.6	25,030	14.7	25,760	15.6	37,810	22.9	45,080	28.2
65–79	8,040	12.4	7,550	11.4	8,550	13.7	12,360	20.1	13,340	22.3
80 and over	14,150	20.0	15,370	20.5	15,120	20.5	22,740	30.5	28,620	39.5
Scotland										
All ages	2,740	13.9	2,590	13.0	2,310	12.0	3,650	19.1	3,640	19.4
65–79	940	11.7	900	11.2	800	10.4	1,420	18.9	1,250	17.0
80 and over	1,520	20.6	1,340	17.3	1,270	17.1	1,990	26.4	2,080	28.0
Wales										
All ages	1,610	14.8	1,010	8.8	1,650	15.1	2,440	22.2	2,900	27.1
65–79	510	11.4	350	7.5	510	11.7	870	20.2	970	22.7
80 and over	900	20.4	610	12.7	930	20.3	1,380	28.9	1,790	39.5
Greater London										
All ages	3,360	16.1	3,140	14.6	3,500	16.8	4,830	23.4	5,960	30.3
65–79	1,070	13.8	930	11.7	1,040	13.9	1,540	21.1	1,880	27.2
80 and over	1,980	22.4	1,920	20.4	2,080	22.8	2,850	31.2	3,630	41.7
London Borough of Sutton										
All ages	150	26.5	110	18.7	90	16.8	90	14.6	220	40.7
65–79	70	35.8	30	15.4	10	2.5	30	13.0	70	43.0
80 and over	60	22.1	70	23.8	80	29.6	50	17.9	120	42.6
Cheam[2]										
All ages	*20*	*29.8*	*0*	*6.8*	*20*	*32.7*	*–10*	*–10.3*	*10*	*17.9*
65–79	*10*	*58.6*	*0*	*–25.0*	*10*	*35.5*	*0*	*–6.7*	*10*	*46.2*
80 and over	*10*	*24.3*	*0*	*9.3*	*10*	*27.6*	*0*	*0.0*	*0*	*6.3*

[1] The data for 1996–97 are provisional as a small proportion of deaths which occurred during this period will not have been registered yet and are therefore excluded from the calculations used to derive the excess winter mortality figures presented here

[2] Addition of Cheam South and Cheam West wards

Note:

All excess winter deaths figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Grave Memorial Stones (VAT)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was recovered by way of VAT in the last tax year in respect of grave memorial stones; and if he will make a statement. [49752]

Mrs. Liddell: We have no estimates of the amount of VAT recovered in respect of grave memorial stones.

Unleaded Petrol

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what level of excise duty he plans to levy on the special grade of unleaded petrol containing lead substitutes which will replace leaded petrol from 2000. [50024]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor is aware of the likely introduction of lead replacement petrol and will be considering the appropriate level of excise duty in the run

up to the next Budget. The industry has indicated that lead replacement petrol could be introduced in mid-1999, in advance of the ban on leaded petrol from 2000.

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *342*, if he will assess the advantages of placing in the Library copies of the documents on the BNFL purchase of Westinghouse Nuclear with the commercially sensitive information removed. [49871]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The documents on the purchase of Westinghouse referred to largely comprise information which is commercially sensitive, and which would be of use to other companies operating in the highly competitive nuclear supplies and services markets. Removing such information would render the reports virtually meaningless. BNFL's own press release contains a helpful statement on the acquisition. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer at what threshold and by what criteria the £3.8 billion Government-guaranteed bonds for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link will count as public expenditure. [49861]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Any amounts paid by Government under their guarantee over the bonds to be issued by London and Continental Railways for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link will count as public expenditure. The Government guarantee itself is a contingent liability; the probability of its being called is remote.

VAT (Motor Fuels)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his current forecast of the revenue from VAT on motor fuels (i) in the current year and (ii) in each of the two subsequent years. [49958]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* HM Customs and Excise do not produce forecasts of VAT receipts at this level of disaggregation.

Training Providers

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many training providers were consulted on the forms used for tax relief on training and how many responded to the consultation exercise; and if he will publish a regional breakdown of the consultees and respondents. [50008]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* An Inland Revenue Budget press release inviting comments on proposals to introduce a single new form to replace the two eligibility forms for vocational training relief (VTR) was issued on 26 November 1996. The press release invited those interested to obtain copies of the draft form and a commentary on it, and copies were placed on the Inland Revenue's Internet web site. Comments were sought by 1 March 1997. In addition, the Inland Revenue wrote to a cross-section of 25 training providers around the country seeking their views on the proposed new form.

The Inland Revenue received nearly 50 requests for a copy of the proposed form. About a dozen responses were received, only two of which were from the 25 training providers selected.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce the administrative burden on training providers of the tax relief claims system. [50009]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* As our recent consultation paper on the Learning Age (Cm 3790) indicated, we are considering targeted public support to encourage people to open individual learning accounts, which might include tax incentives. There is potentially a read across here to Vocational Training Relief (VTR) and we will consider any changes to the administration of the current VTR system in the light of our decisions on individual learning accounts.

Earnings (Scotland)

Mr. Moore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the average weekly earnings gross pay, (i) including and (ii) excluding overtime for full-time workers in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and *(c)* Great Britain for (1) manual, (2) non-manual and (3) all workers; [50177]

(2) if he will list the percentage of full-time workers in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and *(c)* Great Britain earning gross pay, both including and excluding overtime, less than (i) £249.97, (ii) £233.13 and (iii) £174.85 per week for the categories (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; [50176]

(3) if he will list the proportion of full-time workers in *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and *(c)* Great Britain with hourly earnings, gross pay, both including and excluding overtime, below (i) £6.61, (ii) £6.15, (iii) £4.61 and (iv) £3.60 for the categories (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers. [50175]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Michael Moore, dated 14 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary questions (50175, 50176 and 50177) on earnings.

The latest information, from the New Earnings Survey April 1997, is contained in the attached tables. These tables are voluminous and copies of them are being placed in the Library of the House rather than reproduced in Hansard.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the oral announcement of 11 June 1997,

Official Report, columns 1143–57, if he will publish the departmental objectives arising from the Comprehensive Spending Review. [50746]

Mr. Darling: A booklet setting out the revised aims and objectives of Government departments has been published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. They provide a clear statement of what the Government are seeking to achieve through our public expenditure policies.

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the amounts for 1998–99 resulting from the carry-forward of underspends allowed under the end-year flexibility schemes for capital, running costs, MoD operating costs, health, EU structural funds, nationalised industries and welfare to work expenditure. [50745]

Mr. Darling: A list of amounts totalling £362 million for capital expenditure; £574 million for control total running costs; £102 million for MOD operating costs; £225 million for health and personal social services expenditure; £486 million for EU structural funds, £54 million for Nationalised Industries and £62 million for Welfare to Work expenditure is shown in the table.

Subject to Parliamentary approval of any necessary Supplementary Estimates, individual cash, running costs or external finance limits will be increased when carryforward is taken up.

The total increase resulting from the take-up of end-year flexibility within the control total will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Amounts for 1998–99 voted cash limits resulting from the carryover of capital underspends

Class Vote	*Vote title*	*£000*
I, 3	Defence: systems procurement and research	180,127
II, 3	Foreign and Commonwealth Office BBC World Service	2,000
III, 2	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	7,717
V, 1	Department of Trade and Industry: programmes and administration	7,833
V, 2	Department of Trade and Industry: science	7,000
VI, 1	Housing construction, regeneration, countryside and wildlife, England	20,227
VI, 2	Planning, roads, local transport and vehicle safety	1,424
VI, 3	Environmental protection and water	582
VI, 5	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions: administration	6,000
VI, 8	Highways Agency	11,769
VI, 9	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	200
VI, 11	Office of the Rail Regulator	120
VII, 3	Charity Commission	188
VIII, 1	Lord Chancellor's Department	2,107
VIII, 3	Public Record Office	200
VIII, 4	The Crown Prosecution Service	174
VIII, 5	Serious Fraud Office	165
VIII, 6	HM Procurator General and Treasury Solicitor	313
VIII, 7	The Crown Office, Scotland and Lord Advocate's Department	1,169
X, 1	Department for Culture, Media and Sport programme expenditure and administration	3,651
XII, 3	Department of Social Security: administration	4,078
XIII, 1	Agriculture, fisheries and environmental services, Scotland	7,237
XIII, 2	Local government, housing, transport, other environmental services and European funds, Scotland	3,160
XIII, 5	Law, order and protective services, police grant and social work services, Scotland	2,000
XIII, 6	Scottish Office: administration	1,459
XIII, 7	General Register Office for Scotland	150
XIII, 8	Scottish Record Office	321
XIV, 1	Agriculture and fisheries, Wales	2,000
XIV, 2	Industrial support, training and enterprise and education, Wales	1,366
XIV, 3	Roads and transport, housing, other environmental services, Cadw, arts and libraries, health and personal social services, ERDF and Welsh Office administration, Wales	7,276
XV, 1	Northern Ireland Office administration, law, order, protective and miscellaneous services	2,740
XVI, 1	HM Treasury	2,000
XVI, 4	Inland Revenue: administration	1,968
XVI, 5	Inland Revenue: Valuation Office (Executive Agency): administration	2,000
XVI, 8	National Savings	915
XVI, 9	Registry of Friendly Societies	168
XVII, 1	Cabinet Office: Office of Public Service	11,057
Total voted capital carryforward		302,861

Amounts for 1998–99 non-voted cash limits resulting from the carryover of capital underspends

Cash block	*Description of expenditure*	*£000*
DETR/CC	Supplementary credit approvals to the successful local authorities for Capital Challenge	3,175
DETR/OES	Supplementary credit approvals for other environmental services in England: contaminated land, smoke control, air quality, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, Isle of Scilly water and sewerage and recycling (up to 1997–98 only)	920
DETR/LACAP(E)	Basic credit approvals to local authorities in England for housing, transport (except passenger transport authorities), education, health, other services and (for counties only) fire services. Supplementary credit approvals, specified capital grants and certain other grants to local authorities in England for housing and regeneration	3,234

Amounts for 1998–99 non-voted cash limits resulting from the carryover of capital underspends

Cash block	*Description of expenditure*	*£000*
DETR/HC	Grants and capital expenditure financed by the Housing Corporation in England	518
DfEE/LACAP	Supplementary credit approvals for health in England	958
DOH/LACAP	Supplementary credit approvals for health in England	602
NIDI	Services in Northern Ireland broadly analogous to services in Great Britain covered by cash limits but including family practitioner services	14,645
SO/LA1	Net capital allocations and grants to local authorities in Scotland for roads and transport, non-HRA housing, police, education, social work services, general services and urban programme	14,854
SO/LA2	Net capital allocations and grants to local authorities in Scotland for housing including HRA	9,111
SO/CRI	Net capital allocations to local authorities to support spending on New Housing Partnerships, under the Capital Receipts Initiative	624
WO/TC	Capital grants and net lending both to the Tai Cymru and by Tai Cymru to registered social landlords, and supported Housing Revenue Grant	677
WO/LACAP	Basic credit approvals for local authorities in Wales. Supplementary credit approvals for all services (except ERDF projects). Strategic Development Scheme grants (both capital and current) and some housing grants	10,202
Total non voted capital carryforward		59,520
Total capital carryforward		362,381

Amounts for 1998–99 cash limits and external finance limits resulting from the carryover of underspends on health and personal social services expenditure

Class Vote	*Description of expenditure*	*£000*
XI, 1	Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England	56,000
XI, 2	Department of Health administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England	13,648
XIII, 4	Hospital, community health, family health, other health services and welfare food, Scotland	47,391
XIII, 5	Law, order and protective services, police grant and social work services, Scotland	1,072
XIII, 6	Scottish Office: administration	98
NHS Trusts (Scotland)	Scottish Office	38,932
XIV, 3	Roads and transport, housing, other environmental services, Cadw, arts and libraries, health and personal social services, ERDF and Welsh Office administration, Wales	1,575
XIV, 4	Hospital, community health, family health services and other health services (part), Wales	12,960
NHS Trusts (Wales)	Welsh Office	24,371
NHS Trusts (Northern Ireland)	Northern Ireland Office	15,391
NID 1	Services in Northern Ireland broadly analogous to services in Great Britain covered by cash limits but including family practitioner services	14,015
Total health carryforward		225,453

Amounts for 1998–99 cash limits resulting from the carryover of underspends on structural funds expenditure

Cash limit	*Vote title or description of expenditure*	*£000*
Class V, Vote 1	Department of Trade and Industry: programmes and administration	74,155
Class VI, Vote 6	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions: Transport industries	3,145
Class IX, Vote 1	Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services	301,076
Class XIII, Vote 2	Local government, housing, transport, other environmental services and European funds, Scotland	3,977
SO/ERDF	Payments of grants to local authorities and other bodies in Scotland on approved projects which match forecast European Regional Development Fund receipts	57,885
Class XIV, Vote 1	Agriculture, fisheries and environmental services, Wales	901
WO/ERDF	Payments of European Regional Development Fund grants in Wales including supplementary credit approvals in respect of capital expenditure by local authorities	35,702
NID 1	Services in Northern Ireland broadly analogous to services in Great Britain covered by cash limits but including family practitioner services	8,734
Total structural funds carryforward		485,575
Carryforward for Ministry of Defence operating costs underspends		101,594

Amounts for 1998–99 external finance limits resulting from the carryover of underspends on Nationalised Industries expenditure

	£000
Jubilee Line	29,000
Post Office	25,000
Total nationalised industries carryforward	54,000

Amounts for 1998–99 running costs limits within the control total resulting from the carryforward of running costs underspends

Department	*£000*
International Development	7,138
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food	3,943
Intervention Board—Executive Agency	761
Trade and Industry	10,997

Amounts for 1998–99 running costs limits within the control total resulting from the carryforward of running costs underspends

Department	*£000*
Office of Telecommunications	139
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions	35,921
OPRAF	532
ORR	853
Health and Safety Executive	6,591
Home Office	18,434
Lord Chancellor's Department	3,291
Northern Ireland Court Service	667
Crown Prosecution Service	3,228
Public Record Office	1,154
Serious Fraud Office	351
Treasury Solicitor's Department	1,576
Crown Office	581
Department for Education and Employment	69,945
OFSTED	861
Department of Culture, Media and Sport	1,424
OFLOT	819
Department of Health	6,219
Department of Social Security	228,099
Scottish Office	20,601
Scottish Courts Administration	5,656
Scottish Record Office	630
General Register Office	366
Welsh Office	6,135
Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales	813
Northern Ireland Office and Departments	51,307
HM Treasury	12,389
Customs and Excise	16,388
Inland Revenue	28,084
National Savings	2,651
Registry of Friendly Societies	217
Office of National Statistics	3,642
Office of Public Service	13,909
Cabinet Office	1,157
Security and Intelligence Services	6,220
Privy Council Office	254
Total running costs	573,943

Amounts for 1998–99 cash limits resulting from the carryforward of underspends on Welfare to Work expenditure

Class, Vote			*£000*
IX, 1	Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services	Other expenditure	5,365
		Running costs	643
IX, 3	Employment Service	Other expenditure	24,038
		Running costs	20,771
XII, 3	Department of Social Security: administration	Running costs	8,924
XIII, 3	Education, industry, arts and libraries, Scotland	Other expenditure	22
XIV, 2	Industrial support, training and enterprise and education, Wales	Other expenditure	991
NID 1	Services in Northern Ireland broadly analogous to services in Great Britain covered by cash limits but including family practitioner services	Other expenditure	442
		Running costs	1,201
Total Welfare to Work carryforward			62,397

Indirect Taxation

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the average annual amount of indirect taxation paid per citizen in each of the last 10 years. [50196]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Harry Barnes, dated 14 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking for an estimate of the average annual amount of indirect taxation paid per citizen in each of the last 10 years.

This information is shown in the table below. The figures are derived from the annual analysis of the effects of taxes and benefits on household income, which is based on the Family Expenditure Survey. The latest information available is for the fiscal year 1996–97. The actual amount of indirect tax paid by each individual will vary greatly depending on that individual's actual consumption.

Average indirect taxes paid per person in the United Kingdom

Year	*£ per year*
1987	808
1988	920
1989	964
1990	1,052
1991	1,194
1992	1,220
1993–94	1,244
1994–95	1,292
1995–96	1,372
1996–97	1,466

SCOTLAND

Teachers

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many teachers gaining first appointments as teachers in Scotland in each year from 1993–94 to 1997–98 in each council area were given *(a)* permanent full-time contracts, *(b)* permanent part-time contracts, *(c)* non-permanent contracts for over 12 months, *(d)* contracts for three to 12 months and *(e)* contracts for less than three months. [48753]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* The information which is available is set out in the table.

Education authority schools, September 1994
Number of teachers in schools in their first year of probation by mode of employment[1]

	Full-time permanent	*All non permanent*
Scotland	726	1,118
Aberdeen City	24	61
Aberdeenshire	42	53
Angus	22	24
Argyll and Bute	16	22
Clackmannanshire	6	9
Dumfries and Galloway	34	48
Dundee City	38	34
East Ayrshire	5	14
East Dunbartonshire	8	28
East Lothian	15	10
East Renfrewshire	*	17
Edinburgh, City of	59	60
Eilean Siar	12	7
Falkirk	19	24
Fife	111	93
Glasgow City	49	130
Highland	48	40
Inverclyde	7	25
Midlothian	6	14
Moray	14	24
North Ayrshire	*	38
North Lanarkshire	32	92
Orkney Islands	8	5
Perth and Kinross	34	11
Renfrewshire	10	40
Scottish Borders	19	14
Shetland Islands	15	6
South Ayrshire	*	18
South Lanarkshire	27	78
Stirling	11	15
West Dunbartonshire	7	27
West Lothian	17	37

[1] In addition, there were 32 teachers in education authority schools employed on permanent part-time

* The asterisk has been included to avoid disclosure

Source:

School Census

Agricultural Subsidies

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much has been paid out in IACS payments in each of the last three years; what percentage of 1997 payments are currently outstanding and for what reasons; and if he will make a statement. [49327]

Mr. Macdonald: Under the IACS Schemes, £401.35m was paid out in the 1995 scheme year. £374.90m was paid out in the 1996 scheme year and £361.72m was paid out in the 1997 scheme year. A maximum of 2.71 per cent. of the 1997 scheme year payments remains to be paid subject to checking whether the claims are valid.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will announce his plans for allocating total expenditure within his responsibility for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02. [50861]

Mr. Dewar: The tables outline my plans for allocating the total expenditure for Scotland within my responsibility. The tables have been drawn up in accordance with the new public expenditure arrangements announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1195–1201. Thus they identify separately capital and current expenditure within the Departmental Expenditure Limit, Annually Managed Expenditure and resources which fall outwith my Department's Assigned Budget but form part of the Total Budget.

The plans, which are based firmly upon the operation of the Barnett formula provide for an additional £4bn of spending within the Departmental Spending Limit over the 3 years to 2002. In allocating these resources, I have placed particular emphasis on education, health and housing.

For education my proposals will ensure that all 3 year-olds will have the right to a free nursery place by 2002 and that by 2002 there will be 5,000 new classroom assistants in Scottish primary schools, giving a ratio of one adult for every 15 children. I will be establishing a new Excellence Fund to help deliver higher standards in schools and a promise of 42,000 more students entering Scottish colleges will guarantee that Scotland realises its economic potential as a "knowledge economy" of the future.

My second priority is to finance the creation of the most modern health service in Europe. My proposals will ensure that waiting lists will come down and stay down as the service invests for modernisation. By 2000, every hospital, clinic and GP surgery will be linked electronically to facilitate new developments such as one-stop clinics and instant personal booking for hospital appointments.

An additional £300m will be made available for housing. This will support the first steps towards a new future for Scotland's council houses built around the principles of greater community ownership and more private investment in our housing stock.

Beyond these core priorities I am making provision for the establishment of Parliament, including the construction of a world class Parliament building which will be the symbol of the new democracy in Scotland.

The plans also include investment and redeployment of resources across the range of my other programmes. With industry and training I am planning a radical shift from investment in physical infrastructure to a greater emphasis on human capital, and new investment in the commercialisation of research and the promotion of entrepreneurship. I am also planning major new investment in transport, where I will be establishing a new Scottish Public Transport Fund to encourage new public transport initiatives.

This is an excellent settlement for Scotland, demonstrating the concrete steps we are taking to encourage growth and employment, and to provide efficient and modern public services.

Table 1—Scottish Office Budget Summary

	1997–98 £ million	*1998–99 £ million*	*1999–2000 £ million*	*2000–01 £ million*	*2001–02 £ million*	*Growth over CSR period per cent.*
Departmental expenditure limit[1,2]	12,809	13,071	13,768	14,431	15,045	15.1
of which: capital expenditure	1,429	1,571	1,624	1,707	1,831	16.6
Annually managed expenditure						
CAP	324	345	300	282	309	–10.4
Housing support grant	15	13	13	13	13	0.0
Total assigned budget[3]	13,148	13,429	14,080	14,726	15,367	14.4
New deal for schools[4,5]	10	29	27	27	27	–9.1
Non-domestic rates[6]	1,326	1,395	1,441	1,473	1,510	8.2
Total budget[7]	14,484	14,853	15,548	16,225	16,904	13.8

[1] Under the new public expenditure control arrangements and devolution, the Barnett formula used to determine Scottish expenditure applies to the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) in place of the former Scottish Block. Full details of the definitional changes between the DEL and the Control Total were given in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", published in June.

[2] Includes provision for the Crown Office, which will be within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament.

[3] Total budget assigned to the Scottish Parliament. There are some differences between the coverage of the Assigned Budget and the former Scottish Block, the main one being the exclusion of non-domestic rates. Figures here include expenditure on Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance of around £37 million per year which is included in the DEL but excluded from the Assigned Budget for control purposes until 1999–2000.

[4] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99.

[5] Total expenditure financed by the Windfall Tax and administered by the Scottish Office. The majority of expenditure on the New Deal is administered for all of Great Britain by DfEE and DSS. Total expenditure in Scotland on the New Deal is projected to be over £450 million in the period 1997–2002.

[6] Figures for future years uprated in line with the RPI.

[7] Total Scottish public spending within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament or administered by the Scottish Executive.

Table 2—Budget by programme

	1997–98 £ million	*1998–99 £ million*	*1999–2000 £ million*	*2000–01 £ million*	*2001–02 £ million*	*Growth over CSR period per cent.*
Central government support for:						
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	5,431	5,448	5,688	5,864	6,014	10.4
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure[2]	336	359	345	356	392	9.2
Other programme expenditure						
Agriculture, fisheries and food[3]	514	517	478	464	496	–4.0
Arts, libraries and sport	86	77	80	82	84	8.7
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	941	914	1,013	1,070	1,136	24.3
Student support[4]	346	357	320	308	299	–16.2
Health	4,354	4,624	4,924	5,214	5,534	19.7
Housing[5]	422	498	524	634	655	31.6
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	589	599	555	558	608	1.6
Law, order and protective services[7]	452	460	487	488	508	10.3
Crown office	47	49	51	51	51	3.1
Other environmental services	336	328	323	325	327	–0.4
Scottish Parliament and staff	0	0	55	80	47	—
Other public services	155	160	183	194	191	19.5
Roads and transport[8]	242	245	267	270	282	15.1
Social work	63	66	74	77	81	23.8
European social funds and European regional development fund	161	123	153	163	173	40.7
New deal for schools[9]	10	29	27	27	27	–9.1
Total budget	14,484	14,583	15,548	16,226	16,904	13.8

[1] Includes non-domestic rate payments, which are outside the DEL.

[2] The requirement that local authorities must use 50 per cent. of non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt will be abolished from 1 August 1998. This will allow local authorities to raise an estimated £75 million per annum extra from asset sales.

[3] Includes market support under the CAP, which is outside the DEL.

[4] Reflects the new Resource Accounting treatment of student loans announced in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", hence it includes total expenditure on student grants, but only the subsidy element of student loans.

[5] Expenditure funded through the Capital Receipts Initiative is now included in the DEL. Housing figures also include Housing Support Grant, which is outside the DEL.

[6] This line covers industry, enterprise and training expenditure administered by the Scottish Office only. Further expenditure administered by other departments on the New Deal is projected to be around £75 million in 1998–99, and almost £90 million per year in each 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

[7] A large proportion of spending on law, order and protective services is included under central government support to local authorities.

[8] Includes support to nationalised industries.

[9] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99. Additional support for schools' capital expenditure is included in support for non-housing local authority capital expenditure above.

Table 3—Scottish Office Budget Summary in real terms (1997–98 prices)

	1997–98 £ million	1998–99 £ million	1999–2000 £ million	2000–01 £ million	2001–02 £ million	Real growth over CSR period per cent.
Departmental expenditure limit[1,2]	12,809	12,703	13,041	13,336	13,564	6.8
of which: capital expenditure	1,429	1,526	1,538	1,578	1,651	8.1
Annually managed expenditure						
CAP	324	335	284	260	278	–16.9
Housing support grant	16	12	12	12	11	–7.2
Total assigned budget[3]	13,148	13,050	13,337	13,608	13,854	6.2
New deal for schools[4,5]	10	29	25	25	24	–15.7
Non-domestic rates[6]	1,326	1,356	1,365	1,361	1,362	0.4
Total Budget[7]	14,484	14,435	14,727	14,994	15,240	5.6

[1] Under the new public expenditure control arrangements and devolution, the Barnet formula used to determine Scottish expenditure applies to the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) in place of the former Scottish Block. Full details of the definitional changes between the DEL and the Control Total were given in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", published in June

[2] Includes provision for the Crown Office, which will be within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament

[3] Total budget assigned to the Scottish Parliament. There are some differences between the coverage of the Assigned Budget and the former Scottish Block, the main one being the exclusion of non-domestic rates. Figures here include expenditure on Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance of around £37 million per year which is included in the DEL but excluded from the Assigned Budget for control purposes until 1999–2000

[4] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99

[5] Total expenditure financed by the Windfall Tax and administered by the Scottish Office. The majority of expenditure on the New Deal is administered for all of Great Britain by DfEE and DSS. Total expenditure in Scotland on the New Deal is projected to be over £450 million in the period 1997–2002

[6] Figures for future years uprated in line with the RPI

[7] Total Scottish public spending within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament or administered by the Scottish Executive.

Table 4—Budget by programme in real terms (1997–98 prices)

	1997–98 £ million	1998–99 £ million	1999–2000 £ million	2000–01 £ million	2001–02 £ million	Real growth over CSR period per cent.
Central government support for:						
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	5,431	5,294	5,388	5,419	5,422	2.4
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure	336	349	327	329	354	1.3
Other programme expenditure						
Agriculture, fisheries and food[2]	514	503	453	429	448	–11.0
Arts, libraries and sport	86	75	76	76	76	0.8
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	941	888	959	989	1,024	15.3
Student support[4]	346	347	304	285	270	–22.3
Health	4,354	4,494	4,664	4,818	4,989	11.0
Housing[5]	422	484	496	585	591	22.1
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	589	582	526	515	548	–5.8
Law, order and protective services	452	447	461	451	458	2.3
Crown Office	47	48	48	47	46	–4.4
Other environmental services	336	318	306	300	294	–7.6
Scottish Parliament and staff	0	0	52	74	42	—
Other public services	155	155	174	180	172	10.8
Roads and transport[7]	242	238	253	250	254	6.7
Social work	63	64	70	72	73	14.8
European Social Funds and European Regional Development Fund	161	119	145	151	156	30.5
New Deal for schools[8]	10	29	25	25	24	–15.7
Total Budget	14,484	14,435	14,727	14,994	15,240	5.6

[1] Includes non-domestic rate payments, which are outside the DEL

[2] The requirement that local authorities must use 50 per cent. of non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt will be abolished from 1 August 1998. This will allow local authorities to raise an estimated £75 million per annum extra from asset sales

[3] Includes market support under the CAP, which is outside the DEL.

[4] Reflects the new Resource Accounting treatment of student loans announced in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", hence it includes total expenditure on student grants, but only the subsidy element of student loans.

[5] Expenditure funded through the Capital Receipts Initiative is now included in the DEL. Housing figures also include Housing Support Grant, which is outside the DEL.

[6] This line covers Industry, enterprise and training expenditure administered by the Scottish Office only. Further expenditure administered by other departments on the New Deal is projected to be around £75 million in 1998–99, and almost £90 million per year in each of 1999–2000 to 2001–02

[7] A large proportion of spending on law, order and protective services is included under central government support to local authorities

[8] Includes support to nationalised industries

[9] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99. Additional support for schools' capital expenditure is included in support for non-housing local authority capital expenditure above

Local Government Finance

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the local government finance settlement for *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [50725]

Mr. Dewar: My plans for the local government settlement for the next three years will allow councils to increase their spending by almost £840 million a year by 2001–02 including additional funding for pre-school education for three-year-olds.

I propose the Government supported Expenditure (GSE) should be set at £6,544 million in 1999–2000, £6,785 million in 2000–01, and £7,026 million in 2001–02.

After settling aside an amount to support loan and leasing charges, including level playing field support for Public/Private partnership projects, the totals available for allocation as Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) are £5,778 million in 1999–2000, £5,991 million in 2000–01, and £6,194 million in 2001–02. The allocation of these totals between the main local authority service areas is shown in the table. This reflects the priority I have given to certain services, particularly education.

I further propose that Government support for local authority current expenditure—that is, Aggregate External Finance (AEF) which consists of Revenue Support Grant, Specific Grants and Non-Domestic Rate Income—should be set at £5,512 million in 1999–2000, £5,672 million in 2000–01, and £5,823 in 2001–02.

Given these increases it should not be necessary for council tax to increase on average by more than 5 per cent. per annum.

Proposals for the distribution of GAE and AEF to individual local authorities will be issued to councils later in the year.

I intend to replace crude and universal capping with a system of expenditure guidelines. I will retain the existing capping powers in reserve and will use them if council spending is excessive.

I have also decided to remove the requirement on local authorities to use 50 per cent. of certain non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt. It is estimated that this will generate an additional £75 million of spending power which can be channelled into new investment.

GAE (£ million)

Local authority service	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Education	2,591	2,703	2,810
Social work	1,101	1,144	1,180
Police	715	742	763
Fire	178	187	194
Other services	1,193	1,215	1,247
Total GAE	5,778	5,991	6,194

Pedestrian Crossings (Accidents)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* children and *(b)* adults were (i) killed, (ii) seriously injured and (iii) slightly injured on or near pedestrian crossings in Scotland in (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [50224]

Mr. McLeish: Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the number of children and adult pedestrian casualties on or near pedestrian crossings by severity in Scotland from 1994 to 1997.

Table 1: Child pedestrian casualties on or near pedestrian crossings by severity, in Scotland from 1994–97

Crossing/year	*Fatal*	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
On pedestrian crossing				
1994	1	23	80	104
1995	—	24	67	91
1996	—	26	66	92
1997[1]	—	11	62	73
Within zig zag of pedestrian crossing				
1994	—	8	14	22
1995	—	7	6	13
1996	—	7	10	17
1997[1]	—	7	19	26
Within 50 metres of pedestrian crossing				
1994	2	28	87	117
1995	—	24	91	115
1996	—	31	62	93
1997[1]	3	26	66	95
Total				
1994	3	59	181	243
1995	—	55	164	219
1996	—	64	138	202
1997[1]	3	44	147	194

[1] 1997 figures are provisional

Table 2: Adult pedestrian casualties on or near pedestrian crossings by severity, in Scotland from 1994–97

Crossing/year	*Fatal*	*Serious*	*Slight*	*Total*
On pedestrian crossing				
1994	2	61	161	224
1995	—	65	163	228
1996	7	40	147	194
1997[1]	4	50	133	187
Within zig zag of pedestrian crossing				
1994	1	13	18	32
1995	3	24	28	55
1996	—	13	17	30
1997[1]	1	17	12	20
Within 50 metres of pedestrian crossing				
1994	4	95	195	294
1995	8	95	172	275
1996	8	64	155	227
1997[1]	2	61	159	222
Total				
1994	7	169	374	550
1995	11	184	363	558
1996	15	117	319	451
1997[1]	7	118	304	429

[1] 1997 figures are provisional

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many motorists were *(a)* charged with and *(b)* convicted of (i) failure to accord precedence at pedestrian crossings, (ii) failure to comply with traffic signs, (iii) speeding offences, (iv) driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs and (v) reckless driving in Scotland in (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [50188]

Mr. McLeish: The available information is listed in the table.

Persons proceeded against and those with a charge proved where the main offence was for selected motor vehicle offences in Scotland 1994–1996

Main offence	*Persons proceeded against*			*Persons with a charge proved*		
	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Dangerous driving offences	870	860	932	813	796	857
Driving motor vehicle while unfit through drink or drugs	90	166	388	85	164	369
Driving motor vehicle with blood alcohol content above prescribed limit	6,240	6,316	6,668	6,160	6,219	6,561
Speeding in restricted areas	10,684	8,589	6,439	10,597	8,500	6,389
Other speeding offences	6,102	6,570	6,206	6,031	6,476	6,152
Driver's neglect of traffic directions (not pedestrian crossing)	1,721	2,616	1,761	1,619	2,509	1,651
Driver's contravention of pedestrian crossing regulations	699	579	596	668	558	575

Dementia

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the number of people suffering from dementia in Scotland. [50220]

Mr. Galbraith: Comprehensive information is not held centrally but the Dementia Services Development Centre based at Stirling University estimates that around 61,000 people in Scotland have moderate to severe dementia.

Hospitals

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the average size of a hospital in Scotland in terms of *(a)* number of beds and *(b)* employees; if he will estimate the average capital cost of building and equipping such a hospital; and if he will give the average costs of running such a hospital at 1998–99 prices. [50173]

Mr. Galbraith: The average sized hospital in Scotland has 139 beds and 400 employees. The average capital cost of building and equipping a hospital of this size would be about £25 million, and the annual running costs would be about £10 million.

Schools

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the average size of *(a)* a primary and *(b)* secondary school in Scotland in terms of number of classes, pupils and employees including teachers, administrative staff and others; what is the average capital cost at 1998–99 prices of building and equipping such a school; and what are the average revenue costs at 1998–99 prices of running such a school, including salaries. [50174]

Mr. Wilson: The available information is set out in the table.

Average number of taught classes, number of pupils, number of full-time equivalent teachers, capital costs of building and equipping a new school and revenue costs per education authority school

		Primary	*Secondary*
Number of taught classes	September 1997	7.7	Not available
Number of pupils	September 1997	192	788
Number of full-time equivalent teachers[1]	September 1997	9.6	59.7
Capital cost of building and equipping a new school[2]	—	Not available	Not available
Budgeted school running cost[3] at 1997–98 prices	April 1997-March 1998	£345,000	£2,211,000
Budgeted school running cost[3] at 1998–99 prices[4]	April 1997-March 1998	£355,000	£2,273,000

[1] Information on non-teaching staff was not collected in September 1997
[2] Information is not held centrally on the costs of building and equipping new schools
[3] The budgeted school running cost is provided to each School Board annually. It may not necessarily include all the costs of running the school. Other costs may be incurred, for example, capital spending or a proportion of total education authority expenditure on services such as those provided by advisers and psychologists
[4] Adjusted according to GDP deflator

Boundary Review

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of the boundary review for the 1999 unitary authority elections for each of the 32 unitary authorities in Scotland. [50563]

Mr. Macdonald: To date the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland have submitted reports on 7 council areas, namely Angus, East Dumbartonshire, East Lothian, Inverclyde, Moray, Perth and Kinross and West Dunbartonshire and we expect to receive the remainder of the reports between now and the end of September.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judicial Lodgings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average cost of one night's stay for a judge in a judicial lodging. [45691]

Mr. Hoon: In the financial year 1997–98, the average daily cost for a judge (and clerk) to stay in judicial lodging was £615.18. New systems to improve control and reduce costs progressively over three years were implemented last year, and it is intended that these will be reviewed after that three year period.

Decree Absolute Index

Ms Oona King: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will assess the advantages of removing the search fee relating to the Decree Absolute Index. [49472]

Mr. Hoon: As part of the review of fees associated with the Civil Justice Reforms, the Lord Chancellor is considering all civil court fees, including those paid in family proceedings. It is the policy of the Lord Chancellor that those who receive a service should pay for the cost of providing it. In the absence of a taxpayer subsidy, if a free service is provided for some litigants, other fee paying litigants would, in effect, be paying for that service.

Small Claims Court

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many claims were brought before small claims courts; how many of these were successful; and what was the total cost to the taxpayer of the small claims court service in the last year for which figures are available. [50200]

Mr. Hoon: Claims brought before the small claims court are: defended money claims where the amount claimed does not exceed £3,000 and personal injury cases where the amount claimed does not exceed £1,000. These cases are heard by arbitration. In the last financial year there were 97,813 arbitration hearings. Of those, in 87,320 cases the plaintiff was successful.

The majority of those issuing proceedings in county courts pay fees to cover the cost of providing the service. A cost to the taxpayer arises only where the party who would otherwise be required to pay a fee is legally aided or is granted fee exemption or remission. The cost of remission and exemption in non-family county court proceedings in 1997–98 was £1,088,407. Separate information is not available for the small claims court.

Lobbyists

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* the Lord Chancellor, *(c)* their parliamentary private secretaries and *(d)* their special advisers have met representatives of (i) GPC Market Access, (ii) Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn or (iii) GJW Government Relations since 1 May 1997; who these representatives were; and what was discussed at the meetings. [50620]

Mr. Hoon: Ministers, their Special Advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed one of the specific functions of Special Advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention it is not the practice of governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available—a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sudan

16. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what diplomatic initiatives his Department is pursuing to bring about an end to conflict in Sudan. [48716]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are all deeply concerned at the unfolding human tragedy in the Sudan and have been active through the EU and at the UN.

In conjunction with the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Partners Forum, and supported by the General Affairs Council, the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) is in Nairobi for discussions with the Government of Kenya and the SPLA today and will be in Khartoum for talks with the Government of Sudan on 15/16 July, hoping to secure a break in the fighting. We will continue to be active in the search for a long-term solution.

European Union

17. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to seek repatriation of powers from the European Union to the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [48717]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We have no plans to seek changes to the EU Treaties in a way which would remove EC competence. However, in areas where competence is presently shared between the Member States and the EC, the Government believe that the Community should act only where it offers real added value, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

Banana Imports

20. **Mr. Lock:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will hold discussions with Caribbean countries on the new banana regime for imports into the European Union. [48720]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We consulted Caribbean countries closely on how best to amend the EU banana regime in response to the WTO judgment, before decisions were taken in the EU last month. We will remain in close contact with them on this issue, which is of vital importance to the prosperity of many countries in the Caribbean.

Arms Sales

21. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to improve the transparency of data relevant to his ethical foreign policy on arms sales. [48721]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are preparing a report on UK strategic exports. It will include an account of the background to the UK's strategic export controls and of the moves we have made since 2 May 1997 towards a responsible UK and European arms export policy. It will list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted. It will also set out the value of defence exports to each country.

Iran (Terrorism)

22. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress he is making on contacts with the Iranian Government over ending its alleged sponsorship of terrorism. [48722]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We and our EU partners welcome recent Iranian Government statements condemning terrorist attacks in Algeria, Egypt and on Israeli civilians. However, we remain concerned about Iran's record of support for terrorism. We will continue to raise our concerns bilaterally and through the new EU/Iran dialogue.

China

23. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the UK's relations with China following the visit by the Deputy Prime Minister. [48723]

36. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Britain's relations with China. [48737]

Mr. Robin Cook: UK/China relations are in good shape. We are building a strategic relationship for the long term across the full range of our shared interests. The visit of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was an important step in this process. He made progress on a number of environmental and commercial issues.

Windward Islands

24. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with the Windward Islands. [48724]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have very good relations with the Windward Islands. We maintain permanent representation in three of them. Our support for their banana industries is well known. Political agreement of a revised EU banana regime, which is compatible with WTO rules but also recognises Caribbean concerns, was an important UK achievement during our Presidency.

South Korea

25. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UK relations with South Korea. [48725]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We have an important political and economic partnership with the Republic of Korea. We commend Korea's response to the financial crisis so far and its commitment to economic reform. We shall continue to support Korea through this difficult period. We also welcome the positive steps President Kim has taken towards encouraging dialogue with North Korea and fully support efforts to bring about a lasting peace on the Korean peninsula.

Angola

26. **Ms Kingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent developments concerning the peace process in Angola. [48726]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The peace process in Angola has reached a critical stage. UNITA failed to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1176 which called for the extension of state administration throughout Angola, including Andulo and Bailundo where it has its headquarters, by 30 June. New sanctions against UNITA came into effect on 1 July. The mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA) has been extended until 15 August.

I was shocked to learn of the death of Maitre Beye, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative to Angola, who died in an air crash near Abidjan on 26 June. I hope this tragedy may help generate renewed commitments from the Angolan Government and UNITA to genuine reconciliation through completion of the Lusaka Protocol. I urge UNITA to fulfil its remaining obligations under the Protocol without delay and call on the Angolan Government to continue to exercise patience and restraint.

East Timor

27. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Indonesia concerning the situation in East Timor. [48727]

28. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards East Timor. [48728]

33. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Indonesian Government regarding East Timor; and if he will make a statement. [48734]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friends to my earlier reply in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd), *Official Report*, column 169.

Kosovo

29. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what new political initiatives he plans to end violence in Kosovo. [48729]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), *Official Report*, column 184.

Cyprus

30. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had concerning Cyprus. [48730]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I and my colleagues have regular discussions in different forums concerning Cyprus. In particular we continue to give our full support to UN efforts to achieve the resumption of negotiations on a comprehensive political settlement in Cyprus.

Germany

31. **Mr. Waterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UK relations with Germany. [48731]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Relations with Germany are good, and we look forward to President Herzog's State Visit in December.

Democratic Republic of Congo

32. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Nations representative's report on human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [48733]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The United Nations Secretary-General's Investigative Team's report was published on 30 June. We regret that the investigation was not able to be completed. The team was therefore unable to establish the accuracy of many allegations of violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law. It is nonetheless clear from such work as the team were able to conduct that serious violations did take place, and were carried out by a variety of groups. We are carefully considering the report's recommendations and the possibilities for further investigation.

We continue to call upon all countries in the region to acknowledge their international legal obligation to respect human rights. We have urged regional Governments to take appropriate legal action if members of their forces are shown to have been involved in any violations.

EU Enlargement

34. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultation he will be having with other EU countries on EU enlargement as part of Agenda 2000. [48735]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson), *Official Report* , column 178.

Overseas Posts (Properties)

35. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the overseas posts where expenditure on refurbishment or replacement properties will individually exceed £500,000 between 1 May 1997 and 30 April 1999. [48736]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The details requested are shown in the table:

Post	*Project costing £0.5 million+*	*Actual expenditure FY 1997/98 (£ million)*	*Planned expenditure FY 1998/99 (£ million)*
Bogota	Offices—replacement	1.2	.4
Bratislava	Housing—new	.9	.2
Cairo	Offices—refurbishment	1.8	1.4
Guatemala	Offices—replacement	—	.6
Helsinki	Housing—refurbishment	—	.7
Hong Kong	Offices—new	2.2	.4
Karachi	Offices/housing—replacement	.5	2.4
Lagos	Offices—replacement	1.2	2.4
Moscow	Offices/housing/amenities—replacement	17.9	30.8
New Delhi	Housing—refurbishment	.9	.5
Paris	Housing/offices—refurbishment	.9	.6
Quito	Offices—replacement	.8	—
Santiago	Offices—additional	.7	—
Seoul	Housing—replacement	—	.7
Tehran	Offices—refurbishment	.1	.7
Tbilisi	Housing—new	.3	.4
Tokyo	Housing—refurbishment	—	1.
Vienna	Housing—replacement	1.3	—

Note:
Final figures under planned expenditure will depend to varying extents upon local market conditions, exchange rate fluctuations and the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR)

Gibraltar

38. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will next visit Gibraltar to discuss relations between Spain, Gibraltar and the United Kingdom. [48739]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I have no present plans to visit Gibraltar.

Thailand (Adoption)

39. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of adoptions of children by European Union citizens in Thailand. [48740]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Thailand is not a country recognised under the Adoption (Designation of Overseas Adoptions) Order 1973. In common with all other such countries,

adoption orders made there are not recognised under UK law. Thai children must therefore be adopted again through the UK Courts. Applications made on this basis are considered as a matter of discretion outside the Immigration Rules.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review; and if he will make a statement. [48738]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary remained in close touch with ministerial colleagues throughout the Government's Strategic Defence Review, as it was foreign policy led. I refer the hon. Member to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of state for Defence to the House on 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1073–96.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *144*, on Sierra Leone, on how many occasions in April and May officials in his Department initiated discussions with Her Majesty's Customs and Excise in connection with the progress of the investigation into Sandline International; and if he will list the date of each such occasion. [44957]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 9 June 1998]:* In the course of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's close co-operation with HM Customs and Excise throughout this period, the FCO made contact with HMC&E on a number of occasions, most of them by telephone. It would not be normal for us to keep a record of all such contacts between Departments.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish Sir Thomas Legg's report immediately he receives it. [46029]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 15 June 1998]:* I will publish Sir Thomas Legg's report as soon as it is completed.

Israel (Trade)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps will be taken by the Commission to implement the recommendations of its report on Implementation of the Interim Trade Agreement between the European Community and Israel. [50238]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The 29 June General Affairs Council encouraged the European Commission to pursue talks with Israel on the basis of its Communication of 13 May 1998. It noted the Commission's intention to report back on these talks and stressed the need for them to lead to concrete results.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps are being taken to warn importers of the penalties they are likely to incur if they import goods marked "Made in Israel" that originate in the West Bank including East Jerusalem, Gaza or the Golan Heights. [50237]

Mr. Doug Henderson: HMC&E issued a notice to importers in January 1998 (VAT Notice No. 4 Item 12) warning that the European Commission had expressed doubts about the validity of all preference certificates issued in Israel (OJ C338, 8 November 1997). The Commission has subsequently published a Communication to the Council on the implementation of the EC/Israel Interim Agreement, which covered inter alia the issues mentioned by the hon. Member. The Commission hopes that its contacts with the Israelis will lead to progress which will allow the Commission to withdraw their earlier notice to importers.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the General Affairs Council of the European Community took at its meeting on 29 June in respect of the Commission report, Implementation of the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-related matters between the European Community and Israel. [50239]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The General Affairs Council on 29 June adopted conclusions on the issues raised in the two Commission Communications to the Council on EC/Israel trade and regional cumulation of origin. The text of these conclusions appear in the written answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) on 2 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *274–76*.

Correspondence

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department will respond to the letter of 9 June 1998 from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald in respect of Mr. D. A. Ladva; and if he will make a statement about ministerial response times to representations from hon. Members. [50142]

Mr. Fatchett: We have asked our Deputy High Commission in Bombay for a detailed account of the case. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State will write to my hon. Friend after this has been received.

We aim to reply to Members' representations on entry clearance matters within 15 working days. In the month of June, we replied to 67 per cent. of representations from hon. Members about entry clearance cases within this target time.

Indonesia

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage the new regime in Indonesia to release political prisoners. [50218]

Mr. Fatchett: I called on the new Indonesian government to release political prisoners, including those from East Timor, during my visit to Jakarta in May. This message has been repeated in other bilateral contacts and EU statements.

Algeria

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the United Nations office on human rights concerning Algeria; and if he will make a statement. [50358]

Mr. Fatchett: We have maintained regular contact with the United Nations on the situation of human rights in Algeria, particularly during the annual Commission on Human Rights. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is aware of our concerns about the human rights situation there and our hope that the Algerian Government will engage and co-operate fully with UN mechanisms.

We welcomed the UN Secretary-General's announcement that Algeria has invited a top-level mission, under UN auspices, to visit Algeria in the near future.

Land Mines

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will assess the benefits of a pre-legislative hearing by the Defence Committee on the legislation required to meet commitments under the Anti-Personnel Land Mines Ottawa Convention. [48308]

Mr. George Robertson: I have been asked to reply.

As the hon. Member will be aware, the Bill to ratify the Ottawa Convention was passed by the House on 10 July. There was therefore no time for a pre-legislative hearing. However, we sent a memorandum to the Committee which answered a number of questions that they submitted to the MOD. Publication is a matter for the Committee.

HEALTH

Ashworth Hospital

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when Ashworth Hospital informed him that Ian Brady had handed over a large number of pills to Una Forsyth. [49413]

Mr. Boateng: I was informed on 20 April 1998 that an allegation had been made by a woman that Ian Brady had asked her to smuggle tablets out of the hospital, and that these had been handed to a Mr. Peter Green, a former executive director of the Ashworth Hospital Authority. I was told that a search of Ian Brady's room had uncovered one tablet of the type handed over by the woman to Mr. Green, and that the police had been informed.

I was informed on 14 May 1998 that the woman, who was at that point identified to me as Mrs. Forsyth, had indicated that she no longer wanted to complain to the police about the alleged actions of Mr. Brady. I also learned that the police had decided not to proceed with criminal proceedings, and furthermore that Mr. Brady had been put under close observation.

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make public the findings of the review by Dame Fiona Caldicott into the management of Ashworth Hospital. [49347]

Mr. Boateng: Dame Fiona Caldicott was commissioned by the Chairman of Ashworth Hospital Authority to advise the authority on an internal management issue. No commitment was made to publish her findings; it is for the hospital authority to decide to what extent the advice which she has given to them should be made public.

Nuts

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the risk to health arising from pregnant women eating nuts; and what the estimated incidence is of health problems from this cause. [49630]

Ms Jowell: The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) report on peanut allergy was published by the Department on 17 July 1998. The report notes that the prevalence of peanut allergy, which is potentially life-threatening, appears to be increasing and that sensitisation of an infant to peanuts might result from the consumption of peanuts by pregnant or breast-feeding mothers. This risk is greatest in those with a family history of allergic disease. For those people COT recommends that avoidance of peanuts is a sensible, precautionary measure. COT also recommended further research to address the scientific uncertainties. Copies of the report are available in the Library.

Reliable data are not available to estimate the incidence of health problems resulting from pregnant women eating nuts.

Ambulance Trusts

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the ambulance trusts in England in descending order of their performance against nationally set response times in 1997–98. [49732]

Mr. Milburn: The tables contained in the statistical bulletin "Ambulance Services, England: 1997–98" published on 26 June 1998 show how all ambulance trusts in England have performed against nationally set response times. Copies are available in the Library.

Dementia

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on trends in the number of those suffering from dementia sectioned under Mental Health legislation in the last 10 years. [50231]

Ms Jowell: Information available centrally on patients admitted to hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983 identifies the category of disorder, as specified in the Act. These categories are mental illness, psychopathic disorder, mental impairment and severe mental impairment. No further breakdown is available.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current estimate of the number of people suffering from dementia in England. [50204]

Ms Jowell: It is currently estimated that there are 620,000 people suffering from dementia in England.

Deaths (Smokers)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people died from smoking-related illnesses in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [50110]

Ms Jowell: The latest figures available in "The UK Smoking Epidemic: Deaths in 1995", by the Health Education Authority estimate that at least 121,000 people died prematurely as a result of their smoking in the United Kingdom in 1995.

Waiting Times

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the longest waiting time for any patient currently waiting for an orthopaedic operation at Arrowe Park Hospital on the Wirral. [50241]

Mr. Milburn: We are advised that, at present, the longest time that any patient has to wait for an orthopaedic operation at Wirral Hospital (comprising Arrowe Park and Clatterbridge hospitals) is twelve months from the date of being placed on the waiting list. This assumes that the patient is medically fit to undergo an operation.

Asthma

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the national average, expressed as a percentage, of children with asthma-related illnesses; what is the equivalent figure in Derbyshire; and if he will make a statement. [50205]

Ms Jowell: There are no comprehensive data on the number of children with asthma or related conditions. On the basis of all the information available, it has been estimated that

"the prevalence of asthma sufficiently severe to require regular medical supervision is from 4–6 per cent. in children".

This estimate is quoted in "Asthma: An Epidemiological Overview" (Central Health Monitoring Unit, 1995), which brought together a broad range of the best statistics on asthma. Copies are available in the Library.

According to the report of the Health Survey for England 1996, which was published in January 1998, 21 per cent. of children at some time in the past had been diagnosed as suffering from asthma. Copies of this report are also available in the Library. Similarly, in a study of asthma in Great Britain among children aged 12 to 14 years, carried out as part of the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood, and also published in January in the "British Medical Journal", 20 per cent. of the children surveyed had had a diagnosis of asthma at some time.

The equivalent figures for Derbyshire are not available centrally.

Voluntary Organisations

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning section 64 funding; and if he will make a statement. [50221]

Ms Jowell: The Department receives contact from hundreds of voluntary organisations each year about the section 64 general scheme of grants in a variety of respects. For the 1998–99 grants round, over 700 grant applications were made. In addition to this, we regularly receive feedback from over 400 voluntary organisations throughout the year about progress of their work for which grants have been awarded. We also receive a wide range of general inquiries about the scheme.

Radiotherapy

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning the needs of those who have received radiotherapy mis-dosage; and if he will make a statement. [50360]

Ms Jowell: Representations have been made by Radiotherapy Action Group Exposure (RAGE), and the Coalition for Unity in Radiotherapy Advice and Guidance (COU-RAGE). These are mutual support groups which have met Ministers and the Chief Medical Officer on several occasions to discuss concerns of their members who have suffered adverse effects following radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer and gynaecological cancers respectively.

The following action has been taken to help women with damage as a result of radiotherapy for breast cancer:

- in May 1994 the Department issued guidance entitled "Quality Assurance in Radiotherapy—A Quality Management System for Radiotherapy";
- the Royal College of Radiologists, at the Department's request, convened a small group of professionals and lay people in autumn 1994 to consider guidelines for care of women who have suffered tissue damage following radiotherapy for breast cancer. This report was issued to the National Health Service by the Department in October 1995;
- the Royal College of Radiologists carried out a confidential clinical review of 126 women who had suffered injury following radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer at 15 centres in the period 1980–1993. The report published in 1995 makes recommendations on the management of breast cancer, particularly on radiotherapy, and for further research.

With regard to those suffering adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy for gynaecological cancers, a working group, which included representatives from a number of Royal Colleges, voluntary organisations and the Department, was set up in 1996 to consider the preparation of patient information material concerning possible adverse effects following pelvic radiotherapy and to raise awareness generally. The first booklet was published this year. A sub-group is devising guidelines for health professionals on the care of women suffering adverse effects as a result of pelvic radiotherapy and it is anticipated that further patient information material will follow on from that.

New Hospitals (Costs)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimates he has made of the long-term cost of private finance of new hospitals relative to the equivalent costs through the public sector. [50378]

Mr. Milburn: The full business case (FBC) for each scheme compares the long-term costs of providing the facility using the private finance with the equivalent cost of using public funding. In order to be approved, the FBC must demonstrate that private finance initiative offers better or comparable value for money to the publicly funded alternative. Standard investment techniques are used in the FBC to determine the long-term costs of both options.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Century House

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what has been the cost of the maintenance of Century House since June 1996; and what plans there are for the building. [50187]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John C. Locke to Mr. Harry Barnes, dated July 1998:

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Office of Public Service has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question concerning Century House.

The building became the responsibility of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate from 1 April 1996 and the freehold was sold on 9 December 1997.

The cost of maintenance from 1 June 1996 until the date of sale was £224,186 including fees and VAT.

As the sale was on an unconditional basis, we are unaware of the purchasers' present plans for the building but believe that residential use is proposed.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48664]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Information is not readily available in the form requested, but one of the six service standards for central government (often known as the Whitehall standards) requires all departments and agencies to set a target for answering letters from the public and to publish information on their performance against it. A report on the performance of the main department and agencies against the six standards is being prepared and will be placed in the Library of the House shortly. This will be the first time such information has been made available. It shows our commitment to open government and to reporting transparently on our performance.

Lobbyists

Sir George Young: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* the Parliamentary Secretary and *(c)* his special advisers have met representatives of (i) GPC Market Access, (ii) Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn and (iii) GJW Government Relations since 1 May 1997; who these representatives were; and what was discussed at the meetings. [50556]

Dr. David Clark: Ministers, their special advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed one of the specific functions of special advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention, it is not the practice of governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available—a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what target he sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49829]

Mr. Mandelson: *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 13 July 1998, *Official Report,* column *1.*

Lobbyists

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) if he will list those invitations he has received to meetings organised since May 1997 by *(a)* GPC Market Access and *(b)* other lobbying firms which he has declined to attend; and in each case what was the purpose of the meeting; [50564]

(2) if he will list the occasions when he has addressed meetings set up by *(a)* GPC Market Access and *(b)* other lobbying organisations; what was the purpose of these meetings; and if the meetings were conducted under Chatham House rules. [50464]

Mr. Mandelson: I regularly receive invitations from individuals and organisations to address meetings in my Ministerial capacity. I have not addressed any meetings organised by GPC Market Access or any similar political lobbying organisations since May 1997.

Press (Vetting)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) how much time he has spent vetting articles by others prior to their publication in the press since 2 May; [50395]

(2) how many articles by journalists or other contributors to the Press he has vetted since 2 May prior to their publication. [50394]

Mr. Mandelson: None.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Dredged Material (Licence Fees)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what reasons underlay the further rise in the cost of licence fees for sea disposal of dredged material in England and Wales. [49867]

Mr. Morley: Licence fees for the sea disposal of dredged material are set to recover the costs of operating the licensing system. These costs include the monitoring of selected disposal sites. As the dumping of sewage sludge will cease at the end of 1998, the full cost of such monitoring must now be met from licence charges for the disposal of dredged material.

Mr. Syms: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on the UK ports industry of the rise in the cost of licence fees for sea disposal of dredged material. [49868]

Mr. Morley: The Government have made no detailed assessment of the impact on the ports industry of the rise in the cost of disposal licence fees. Generally, licence fees represent a very small proportion of the cost of the associated dredging operation.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the contribution that closed areas could make in the future development of fisheries management. [50541]

Mr. Morley: Closures in certain areas can benefit fish stocks if they are sufficiently large and well targeted, if they can be effectively enforced and if they are not undermined by an increase in fishing effort in other areas. The possibility of introducing new closed areas is under current consideration by fishing interests and fisheries scientists in this country and internationally.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the latest National Federation of Fisheries Organisations and Scottish Fisheries Federation policy proposals for the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. [50571]

Mr. Morley: I have warmly welcomed the joint strategy of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and Scottish Fishermen's Federation as a good basis for discussion.

Drift Nets

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance his Department gave to fishermen for investment in the tuna drift net fishery in the early 1990s. [50408]

Mr. Morley: There were no specific aids for investment in the tuna drift net fishery in the early 1990s. Some vessels may have benefited from safety grants or other structural aids which were available at that time. But it is not now possible to identify the fishing activities they were then engaged in from readily available records.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to compensate fishermen who have invested in the tuna drift net fishery in the event of the European Union wide ban. [50407]

Mr. Morley: The June 1998 Fisheries Council agreed to decide before the end of 1998 on supporting measures that may be introduced for Community fishermen affected by the phasing out of high seas drift nets. Once this is done, the Government will decide on any special measures that should be introduced in the UK.

Artificial Insemination of Cattle

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning the production of the draft artificial insemination of cattle regulations. [50469]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry received 20 replies to the formal consultation letter on the Regulations which was issued on 6 November 1997. A copy of the consultation letter and replies are available for reference in the main MAFF Library at Whitehall Place. Other letters and telephone calls on the subject have also been received.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many staff have been redeployed from drafting the artificial insemination of cattle regulations to work related to the BSE-related beef export ban; and when he expects them to resume their former role; [50471]

(2) when he expects to publish the draft artificial insemination of cattle regulations. [50472]

Mr. Rooker: One officer who had a leading role in the drafting of the proposed new Artificial Insemination of Cattle Regulations has been redeployed to BSE-related work. The aim is to have a full complement of staff working on the AI Regulations in the Autumn although this is dependent on the Government priorities at that time. When work does resume, further consideration will be given to the areas which we know remain of concern to the industry. The date on which the Regulations will be made depends on when the work resumes and how quickly remaining problems can be resolved.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when officials from his Department last met representatives of the Artificial Insemination of Cattle Operators; and what decisions were reached. [50468]

Mr. Rooker: Formal discussions with a cross-section of representatives of the artificial insemination (AI) in cattle industry took place on 20 March 1998 to discuss responses to the consultation on the new draft AI Regulations and to clarify certain aspects of the new regulations. It was agreed at the meeting that officials would give further consideration to the use and disinfection of dry shippers, the use and control of field flasks, the rules applicable to the supervision and control of inseminators and donor bull identification numbers; and that industry would be informed when the proposals were being submitted to Ministers.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to enforce the existing regulations concerning the artificial insemination of cattle. [50470]

Mr. Rooker: The Artificial Insemination of Cattle (Animal Health) (England and Wales) Regulations 1985 continue to be enforced by Ministry staff as they have been since they came into force.

Vitamin B6

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *416*, if he will place in the Library copies of the responses he received to his consultation on vitamin B6, other than those requesting confidentiality. [50456]

Mr. Rooker: The responses to the consultation exercise on vitamin B6 are currently being analysed and summarised. Copies of those from respondees who have not requested confidentiality will be placed in the Library in due course.

British Cattle Movement Service

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library copies of the publicity material issued by the British Cattle Movement Service. [50747]

Mr. Rooker: I have placed in the Library a leaflet introducing the computerised Cattle Tracing System together with a further leaflet advertising the British Cattle Movement Service helpline, and a letter sent to farmers following problems with the distribution of the helpline leaflet. I will add further material which is issued by the British Cattle Movement Service before the Cattle Tracing System is launched on 28 September, as this material becomes available.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Environmental Policies

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the current energy consumption of her Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what plans there are for including energy efficiency performance figures in her Department's annual report. [50089]

Clare Short: The latest year for which figures are available is 1996–97. The total cost of delivered energy was £212,925. In kwh equivalent terms, this amounted to 5.648 million kwh of North Sea oil, 2.963 million kwh purchased from the relevant electricity utility, and 8,020 litres of gas oil. The Department is following the targets set centrally of aiming to reduce energy consumption in 2000 by 20 per cent. from the 1990–91 outturn. Our energy performance is included in the central returns on energy efficiency on the Government estate maintained by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's waste is recycled; and what targets there are for increasing this figure. [50090]

Clare Short: The only form of waste on which we keep figures is paper sent for recycling. In 1997–98, we recycled 31 tonnes. This figure has been broadly the same for the past three years. We have no explicit targets. However, the Department monitors paper usage and encourages its recycling.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Training

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effects that the introduction of three-year public spending limits will have on the establishment of a funding regime for work-based youth training which enables TECs to enter into longer term contracts with training providers. [49951]

Dr. Howells: We have not yet had the opportunity to assess the effects of the three-year public spending limits on the way Government contracts with TECs. However, we will be considering this issue fully as part of the review of the role of TECs and their funding arrangements which is currently under way.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of national TEC expenditure has been allocated to *(a)* youth training and *(b)* training for the long-term unemployed. [47040]

Dr. Howells: In 1998–99, the DfEE's planned expenditure on programmes contracted with TECs in England is £1.287 billion of which 56 per cent. (£723m) is for work based training for young people and 25 per cent. (£324m) is for work based training for adults.

Youth Services

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to establish a clearer statutory base for local authority youth services in order to safeguard levels of these services. [50575]

Dr. Howells: The Green Paper *The Learning Age* reaffirmed the Government's commitment to placing the youth service on a stronger statutory footing. A consultation paper will be issued later this year which will consider the role of the youth service, in relation to wider services for young people.

New Deal

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of those called to initial interviews under the New Deal have not attended; and what the percentage was in each travel-to-work area. [47091]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 24 June 1998]:* During May 1998 the number of 18–24 year olds who have ceased to claim JSA before attending their initial interview is 6 per cent. nationally. This will include young people who have found work or decided to claim another benefit.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what analysis he has undertaken of the 18–24 year olds on the New Deal programme who are not accounted for when they finish the Gateway. [49429]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* The Jobseekers Act 1995 lays no obligation on people to report what they are doing once they have signed off state

benefits. I asked the Employment Service to undertake follow up of the young people who have left the New Deal Gateway for unknown destinations. The outcomes of this follow-up have been published in the Department's press notices of 27 May and 25 June. I have also asked for the very thorough evaluation survey of participants that will take place later to obtain detailed evidence about what happens to this group. So far, of New Deal entrants, only 4 per cent. have left and cannot be accounted for. In the first nine months of Project Work pilots, a quarter of entrants had left for unknown destinations.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money has been spent promoting, launching and monitoring and marketing the New Deal initiative in the Christchurch constituency. [48817]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to break down this expenditure information by constituency. The provisional amount spent nationally on New Deal for 18–24 year olds for 1997–98 is £36 million. The majority of this amount represents expenditure incurred centrally in supporting the early implementation of the New Deal. A final figure will be available by the end of August. The New Deal is financed from the receipts of the Windfall Tax on the privatised utilities. Expenditure is planned over the Parliament as a whole and unspent resources in any single year are available for spending on New Deal in future years.

The estimated cost for 1998–99 is £594 million, and for 1999–2000, £675 million. New Deal is demand led and actual provision for any particular year will be decided in the light of the level of unemployment and experience gained in running New Deal.

The above figures are for Great Britain and reflect the cost of New Deal for young people to the Department for Education and Employment.

Science Students

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to improve the availability of science, engineering and technology higher and further education to women in rural areas. [47513]

Dr. Howells: Our proposals for encouraging lifelong learning for people throughout the UK, including rural communities, are set out in the consultation paper "The Learning Age". Higher education is available in England from over 100 higher education institutions, including the Open University, and from many further education colleges. The Further Education Funding Council has a duty to secure the provision of adequate and sufficient facilities for further education.

The University for Industry will break down barriers to learning by making provision more flexible and accessible. It will offer rural learners the opportunity to access information and advice, register on courses, access support from tutors and work at their own pace, using the most suitable methods at home, in the workplace or at local learning places.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Budget statement, on 17 March 1998, *Official Report,* columns 1097–1112, an extra £50 million funding for rural transport services—mainly additional bus services—which will enable more young people in rural communities to access post-16 provision.

Playgroups

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's policy regarding *(a)* the provision of and *(b)* the funding of playgroups. [47858]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 1 July 1998]:* The Government value the contribution pre-schools and playgroups can make to early education, day care and the continuing training and development of adults. Many playgroups receive Government funding in respect of eligible four year olds attending their groups. The Government already give an annual grant of £1.2 million to the Pre-school Learning Alliance. In addition, we announced on 6 May that £500,000 would be made available to help good-quality voluntary groups in danger of closing. Pre-school groups will also be able to benefit from the £6 million allocated for extra childcare places integrated with early education.

Grammar Schools

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the maximum number of eligible parents per child who can be permitted to vote in a ballot on the status of grammar schools. [50484]

Mr. Byers: The proposals follow the procedures adopted by the previous government for ballots on the question of grant-maintained status. This means that there is not a maximum number of eligible parents.

Job Clubs

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many job clubs were operating in *(a)* June 1997 and *(b)* June 1998. [50483]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Damian Green, dated 14 July 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question to him about the number of Jobclubs operation in (a) June 1997 and (b) June 1998. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

There were 911 Jobclubs operating nationally in June 1997, but I am unable as yet to supply the comparable figure for June 1998. However, June figures should be available later this month for the total number of Jobclubs and other programmes we are providing in all locations and I will write to you again as soon as this information becomes available.

I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful at this stage.

DEFENCE

Trident

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his latest estimate of *(a)* the cost of Trident warheads, *(b)* their life and *(c)* the costs of disposal. [50392]

Mr. George Robertson: The production costs for Trident warheads in the last financial year were £20 million. Taking into account decisions made in the Strategic Defence Review, our current estimate for the total production costs is some £300 million.

We expect the Trident warhead to be kept in service for the full planned 25 to 30 year life of the Trident force. Limited life warhead components will be replaced and the warheads refurbished as required during this period.

Warhead disposal costs will depend upon future plans for the use or disposal of fissile material from the warheads.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total number of Trident warheads currently held; how many have been destroyed; and how many have been ordered. [50379]

Mr. George Robertson: As stated in the Strategic Defence Review White Paper published on 8 July, (Cmd 3999), the United Kingdom will maintain an operationally available stockpile of fewer than 200 Trident warheads. Changes are being implemented to our warhead production plans to maintain the operationally available stockpile at this reduced level. Some warheads will also be required to provide a necessary processing margin and for technical surveillance purposes. I am withholding details of the exact number of Trident warheads currently held and information on Trident warhead production and decommissioning plans under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information relating to Defence, Security and International Relations.

Strategic Arms Exports

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the annual report on strategic exports to be published. [50610]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 12 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *110*.

Infantry Units

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* establishment and *(b)* actual strengths of each (i) regular and (ii) TA infantry unit. [47209]

Dr. Reid: The establishment and actual strength of each regular and TA infantry unit is detailed below. For completeness, the total establishment and strength of the Infantry Arm is also given.

Regular Infantry

The established liability of the Army, the Manpower Planning Target, is revised in April and October each year. The total requirement includes those posts filled by infantry personnel away from their units in specific infantry appointments or general appointments which may be filled by personnel from any cap badge. The total liability and strength of regular infantry personnel as at 1 May 1998 was:

Infantry

	Liability (establishment)	*Strength*
Soldiers	25,049	22,458
Officers	2,739	2,726
Gurkhas	2,101	2,555

The infantry deficit at soldier level is being addressed actively through the 'Manning the Army' strategy which aims to bring the Army to full strength by 2002.

The table shows the liability (establishment) and strength of soldiers by infantry unit. Owing to the nature of the cap badge system, only at soldier level can both the establishment and liability be shown in full. A similar breakdown for Infantry officers is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost and effort. Infantry officers, like all Army officers, fill a proportion of posts that are able to be filled from any cap badge, the only qualifying criteria being suitability and relevant experience.

The figures exclude those infantry personnel currently serving in posts away from their parent units.

Infantry soldiers

	Unit liability (establishment)	*Strength*
As at 1 May 1998		
Household Division		
1st Battalion Grenadier Guards	522	426
N Company Grenadier Guards	102	105
1st Battalion Coldstream Guards	522	513
7 Company Coldstream Guards	102	113
1st Battalion Scots Guards	559	418
F Company Scots Guards	102	88
1st Battalion Irish Guards	629	545
1st Battalion Welsh Guards	522	503
Scottish Division		
1st Battalion Royal Scots	582	408
1st Battalion Royal Highland Fusiliers	626	500
1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers	520	440
1st Battalion Black Watch	523	446
1st Battalion Highlanders	583	476
1st Battalion Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders	558	513

Infantry soldiers

	Unit liability (establishment)	*Strength*
Queen's Division		
1st Battalion Prince of Wales's Royal Regiment	539	415
2nd Battalion Prince of Wales's Royal Regiment	579	481
1st Battalion Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	555	532
2nd Battalion Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	625	577
1st Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment	519	483
2nd Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment	539	541
King's Division		
1st Battalion King's Own Royal Border Regiment	625	575
1st Battalion King's Regiment	519	505
1st Battalion Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire	519	493
1st Battalion Green Howards	625	560
1st Battalion Queen's Lancashire Regiment	555	507
1st Battalion Duke of Wellington's Regiment	522	520
Prince of Wales's Division		
1st Battalion Devon and Dorset Regiment	565	538
1st Battalion Cheshire Regiment	555	511
1st Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers	519	511
1st Battalion Royal Regiment of Wales	625	520
1st Battalion Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment	581	511
1st Battalion Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment	625	631
1st Battalion Staffordshire Regiment	519	488
Light Division		
1st Battalion Light Infantry	539	497
2nd Battalion Light Infantry	555	521
1st Battalion Royal Green Jackets	579	451
2nd Battalion . yal Green Jackets	625	625
The Parachute Regiment		
1st Battalion Parachute Regiment	544	466
2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment	544	450
3rd Battalion Parachute Regiment	519	427
Royal Irish Regiment		
1st Battalion Royal Irish Regiment	581	439
Gurkhas		
1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles	742	765
2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles	855	913
The Gurkha Reinforcement Company and The Battalion The Parachute Regiment	0	115
The Gurkha Reinforcement Company The 1st Battalion The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment	0	115
The Gurkha Reinforcement Company The 1st Battalion The Royal Scots	0	115
The Gurkha Demonstration Company Royal Military Academy Sandhurst	133	133
The Gurkha Demonstration Company Brecon	100	100
Territorial Army Infantry Units		
6th Northumberland Battalion Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	532	600
4th Battalion (Volunteer) The Parachute Regiment	531	696
6th (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment	531	493
7th (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment	532	582
4th/5th Battalion the Green Howards (Alexandria Princess of Wales' Own Yorkshire Regiment)	531	423
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Duke of Wellington's Regiment (West Riding)	531	542
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment	530	514
7th Battalion The (Durham) Light Infantry	531	526
3rd Battalion The Prince of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire	327	423
4th (Volunteer) Battalion The Devonshire and Dorset Regiment	531	457
6th Battalion The Light Infantry (Volunteer)	531	495
5th (Volunteer) Battalion The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment	566	533
6th/7th (Volunteer) Battalion The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment	530	504
5th (Volunteer) Royal Green Jackets	382	304
2nd (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Gloucester Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment	531	453
4th (Volunteer) Battalion The Queens Lancashire Regiment	529	508
5th/8th (Volunteer) Battalion The Kings Regiment	529	520
4th (Volunteer) Battalion The Kings Own Border Regiment	529	419
3rd (Volunteer) The Cheshire Regiment	373	376
5th (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	564	484
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Staffordshire Regiment (The Prince of Wales)	563	521
5th Battalion The Light Infantry (Volunteer)	527	528
2nd (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Regiment of Wales	532	498

Infantry soldiers

	Unit liability (establishment)	*Strength*
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Welsh Fusiliers	530	531
4th (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Green Jackets	530	305
10th (Volunteer) Battalion The Parachute Regiment	530	311
The London Regiment	531	302
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Black Watch Regiment (The Royal Highland Regiment)	374	325
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Highlanders (Seaforths, Gordons and Cameroons)	537	438
7th/8th (Volunteer) Battalion The Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (Princess Louise's)	531	472
3rd (Volunteer) Battalion The Royal Highland Fusiliers (Princess Margaret's Own Glasgow & Ayrshire Regiment)	530	440
The Lowland Volunteers	532	396
4th/5th Battalion The Royal Irish Rangers	543	497

Notes:

1. Includes Queen's Own Gurkha Officers Gurkha numbers decrease throughout the year (through retirement) until the annual intake at the end of the year
2. A similar breakdown for Infantry officers is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost and effort. Infantry officers, like all Army officers, fill a proportion of posts that are able to be filled from any cap badge, the only qualifying criteria being suitability and relevant experience
3. The figures for Territorial Army infantry units include both officers and soldiers

Services Nationality Rules

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the services nationality rules requiring parents, step-parents or guardians of applicants for employment to have been Commonwealth citizens or Irish citizens resident in the United Kingdom. [49350]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on 18 February 1998, *Official Report*, [illegible] 665–66.

Chemical Weapons

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Chemical Defence Establishment field trial reports series of documents *(a)* started and *(b)* finished; how many documents were produced in this series; and how many of these documents are currently unclassified. [49490]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 14 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the Chemical Defence Establishment field trial reports series of documents.

The Chemical Defence Establishment which is now part of DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector at Porton Down published a series of field trial reports between 1969 and 1995. The series contained 114 documents of which 6 are currently unclassified.

The titles of the unclassified documents are as follows:

23 Trials of the non destructive test of air filtration units in HMS Berwick at Portsmouth, October 1971

27 CR decontamination trial

87 Noise propagation from commercial explosives

89 A report of multiple smoke plume trials designed to establish some atmospheric statistics

97 Field testing of the Canadian profire kit on CDE range

127 Trial Madona—a field experiment to measure high resolution wind fields and concentration fluctuations over complex terrain

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made by his Department in investigating the alleged chemical agent detections during the Gulf war on 19 to 21 January 1991 in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia; who is carrying out this investigation; when this investigation began; and when he expects this investigation to be completed. [49491]

Dr. Reid: As part of the New Beginning statement on 14 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns 1–5, I announced that my Department would be carrying out three reviews of specific events during the Gulf conflict. Work on the second of these reviews, which concerns the alleged chemical agent detections in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia between 19–21 January 1991, began in March this year, after the results of the first review into the tank of liquid found at a school in Kuwait had been published. The work is being conducted by the Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit in my Department, which is seeking to identify and analyse all available documentation relevant to this matter and to interview those personnel directly involved. The results will be made public as soon as the review is complete, which is expected towards the end of this year.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the titles of the unclassified papers produced in the Chemical Defence Establishment technical paper series since January 1996. [49493]

Mr. Spellar: The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of DERA at Porton Down has produced 18 unclassified papers in the Technical Paper series since January 1996. A list of these papers has been placed in the Library.

Departmental Contacts

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the meetings held by *(a)* himself, *(b)* his ministers and *(c)* special advisers in his Department with people outside the Government on (i) 30 June and (ii) 2 July; [49548]

(2) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* his Ministers and *(c)* his special advisers have met representatives of (i) GPC Market Access, (ii) Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn

and (iii) GJW Government Relations since 1 May 1997; who these representatives were; and what was discussed at the meetings [50473]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* Ministers, their Special Advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed, one of the specific functions of the Special Advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention it is not the practice of governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available—a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special Advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contingency plans his Department is making in the event of the failure of computer systems to recognise the year 2000; when he expects them to be in place, and tested; and if he will make a statement. [48846]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence recognises the risk posed to operational capability by the Year 2000 problem. While every effort is being made to ensure that all systems are Year 2000 compliant, some work will not be completed in time. The MOD is, therefore, developing contingency plans to ensure that we continue to meet our operational commitments and that essential Defence capabilities are maintained. The target date for completion of these plans is 31 December 1998, with testing continuing throughout 1999, and regularly thereafter to ensure that the plans remain valid for any similar problems which might arise in the future.

Turkey

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Turkish military personnel have been involved in military training in the United Kingdom during the last 12 months; and if he will list the type of military training that was given. [49285]

Dr. Reid: Training has been provided in the UK to members of the Turkish armed forces, as is normal practice between NATO nations. Between 1 July 1997 and 1 July 1998, 41 Turkish military personnel have been involved in military training in the United Kingdom. Training has included attendance at the Royal College of Defence Studies, the Advanced Command and Staff Course, the International Sub-Lieutenants' Course, the International Principal Warfare Officers' Course, the Maritime Warfare Course, the International Imagery Interpretation Course, and courses on the Principles of Computer Based Training, Instructional Techniques, Training Design, Quality Control, and English Language Training.

Service Personnel (Parental Leave)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will grant unmarried partners in the armed forces the same rights to parental leave as married couples. [50400]

Dr. Reid: The Armed Forces offers maternity leave to which any pregnant servicewoman is entitled, whether married or unmarried, in accordance with the law. As a good employer the Services seek, whenever possible, to grant a serviceman annual leave (or compassionate leave if appropriate) to attend his partner, either during or, immediately after childbirth. Operational commitments may, on occasions, make it impossible for every serviceman to be released from his duties.

Foreign Policy Base Line

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his oral statement of 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 1080, in which paragraphs of the Strategic Defence Review the Foreign Policy Baseline is set out. [50443]

Mr. George Robertson: The foreign and security policy analysis on which the Strategic Defence Review is based is set out in Chapter Two of the White Paper, "Security Priorities in a Changing World" (paragraphs 17–43), and in the second of the Supporting Essays, "The Policy Framework".

NATO

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the impact on the United Kingdom defence budget of the proposed expansion of NATO. [50393]

Mr. George Robertson: NATO has estimated that the cost to its military common budgets of the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland will be some $1.5 billion over ten years. The United Kingdom's share of this cost will, at current exchange rates, be some £110 million over the 10 years. On present expectations, the costs to the United Kingdom's defence budget will be met from within existing and planned provision.

Large Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's estimate of the cost of the two proposed large aircraft carriers separately identifying their *(a)* running costs and *(b)* disposal costs. [50391]

Mr. George Robertson: At this early stage in the project, we envisage an acquisition cost for two aircraft carriers of around £2 billion, including combat system and initial support costs but excluding the cost of aircraft. The running costs of future carriers will depend on: the ship design and the number and type of aircraft they will carry, both of which remain to be determined, but which will focus on the need to minimise through-life costs. No consideration has yet been given to the disposal of future carriers given that these vessels are likely to be in-service till around the mid-century.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many copies of the Strategic Defence

Review were sent outside the main building of his Department in sealed envelopes before Wednesday 8 July; and when they were sent; [50459]

(2) which *(a)* Government departments, *(b)* individual Ministers, *(c)* special advisers and *(d)* non-Governmental organisations received copies of the Strategic Defence Review before 12.30 pm on Wednesday 8 July. [50460]

Mr. George Robertson: It is not our practice to comment in detail on matters of this kind while a formal investigation is in progress.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what terms *(a)* his Department's head of public relations and *(b)* any of her staff discussed the contents of the Strategic Defence Review before 12.30 pm on Wednesday 8 July, with *(a)* members of the press and *(b)* other persons outside his Department. [50457]

Mr. George Robertson: In her dealings with the Press my Director of Information Strategy and News, and her staff, have responded to all inquiries about the Strategic Defence Review (which have all been from the Press) under the normal terms. Until the Press Conference held on Wednesday 8 July on an embargo, lock-in basis, they provided factual information about the background, processes, and the development of the thinking of the defence review. Such information was also set out by me in two major speeches, the BBC documentary on the processes underlying the Strategic Defence Review, and in answers to the House prior to publication of the White Paper on 8 July.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the name and position of the individual or individuals carrying out the inquiry into the leaking of the Strategic Defence Review; when he expects the inquiry to be concluded; and how he intends to report the conclusions of the inquiry to the House. [50461]

Mr. George Robertson: The individual who will conduct the inquiry, by custom, is a member of a panel of investigators which the Cabinet Office draw upon to conduct investigations. Its members are in the main distinguished and senior retired public servants. A member of the panel, who will not be named, has been selected by the Cabinet Office to investigate the leaking of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR). The inquiry will be conducted with all possible speed. Once the conclusions of the inquiry have been presented to me, I will decide how to report them to the House.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which of his special advisers, and on what terms, discussed the contents of the Strategic Defence Review before 12.30 pm on Wednesday 8 July, with *(a)* members of the press, *(b)* political lobbyists and *(c)* special advisers to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Foreign Secretary. [50458]

Mr. George Robertson: In the normal course of government business, both special advisers would have discussed the contents of the Strategic Defence Review with special advisers to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary. Over the course of the Review, both special advisers would have briefed members of the Press and on occasions, political lobbyists on the background processes and emerging themes of the Review but not on its detailed conclusions in line with the requirements of propriety.

Territorial Army

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to have finalised his work on the future organisation of the TA and the TA and cadet centres in time for them to be presented to the House before the defence debate. [50554]

Dr. Reid: It is our intention that the detailed planning for the future organisation of the Territorial Army should be complete by the autumn. The results of this work will be announced to the House as soon as possible.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 July 1998

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Lorry Drivers (Accident Insurance)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce legislation to make it a legal requirement for employers of lorry drivers working overseas to be fully insured for accident and loss of life including the costs of returning bodies to the United Kingdom. [49952]

Dr. Strang: The Employer's Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969 already requires employers to insure their liability to employees for bodily injury or disease sustained during their employment. If an employee is normally based in Great Britain, their employer is required to have employer's liability insurance for them. Where the employer's liability is proved, a relevant policy will pay compensation for loss of life, and refund the expense of returning a body to the United Kingdom.

Sewage (Falmouth)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the results obtained by the Environment Agency in respect of the interim Falmouth sewage scheme. [50084]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency is carrying out a detailed assessment of the data collected during two recent surveys, which were carried out over the periods 2–5 June (Neap tides) and 23–26 June (Spring tides).

Preliminary findings show that the Falmouth Interim Sewage Treatment Scheme—which is a short-term measure pending implementation of the full scheme by 2000—has brought clear improvements to local bathing waters at Maen Porth, Swanpool and Gyllyngvase, which have been identified under the EC Bathing Water Directive. Also, there has been no deterioration in general water quality or in shellfish waters in the area. I understand that the Agency will publish the full results of their recent surveys as soon as possible.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue further guidance to local authorities on the methodology they should use to predict waste disposal needs. [50399]

Angela Eagle: We have no immediate plans to do so, although my Department plans to issue a new Planning Policy Guidance Note on "Waste disposal and management" in the Autumn. Local authorities should discuss future disposal needs with waste collection authorities, with interested parties in their area, with neighbouring authorities, and with the Environment Agency (particularly in the context of their work on life cycle analysis).

I would also add that local authorities should not be restricting their thinking to waste disposal, but should widen their consideration to the need for recycling, composting and energy recovery facilities—thoughts on this are set out in our recently published consultation paper on the national waste strategy "Less Waste: More Value".

Brown-field Sites

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the impact of the Government's proposals for regeneration by the use of brown-field sites on *(a)* housing demand and *(b)* employment opportunities in urban areas. [50329]

Angela Eagle: The Government have not received any specific representations on this issue recently. Nevertheless, in developing our policy for urban areas, we are fully aware that a balance needs to be struck between the need to promote the re-use of previously developed sites for housing, the need to ensure a continuing supply of employment sites, and the need to promote a high quality environment in our towns and cities. We will be issuing a draft revised Planning Policy Guidance note on housing (PPG3) for consultation later this summer, which will address these issues.

Railway Standards

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take measures to ensure that *(a)* standards of reliability, cleanliness and safety on the railways are improved and *(b)* period ticket holders are given an uncomplicated system allowing them to claim fair, immediate and adequate compensation when poor service is provided. [50330]

Dr. Strang: The Government are reviewing the regulation of the railway as part of our overall review of transport policy, and our proposals for its long term reform will be published in our forthcoming White Paper.

Under the existing arrangements for the railway, train operators must comply with the terms of their franchise agreement with the Franchising Director. The franchise agreement set standards for train reliability and include provision for the monitoring and enforcement of these standards; and require operators to clean stations regularly. There are no industry-wide standards for train cleanliness; however, some operators monitor train cleanliness as an element of the regular surveys of customer satisfaction that they are obliged to undertake. The Government look to the Health and Safety Commission and Executive, as safety regulators for the railways, to use their advisory and enforcement powers as appropriate to see that rail safety standards are maintained and improved where necessary.

Period ticket holders are compensated for poor performance under the terms of the relevant operator's Passenger's Charter which is required by the Franchising Director to include a compensation scheme at least as favourable to passengers as that which was operated by

British Rail. The Franchising Director continues to seek improvements to Charters whenever suitable opportunities arise.

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment the Government have made of the *(a)* advantages and *(b)* costs of a national system of concessionary travel fares for (i) older and (ii) disabled people; [50076]

(2) if he will take steps to eliminate the differences between areas in the savings available to older and disabled people from concessionary travel passes. [50077]

Dr. Strang: These matters are being considered as part of our review of integrated transport policy. The advantages and costs of any standard scheme would depend on the level at which its benefits are set.

Local Government

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the former county boroughs in England prior to 1973–74 which are not unitary authorities; and what plans he has to extend the system of unitary authorities. [50442]

Mr. Raynsford: The following local authorities were county boroughs prior to 1973 and are not unitary authorities:

Barrow-in-Furness
Burnley
Canterbury
Carlisle
Chester
East Staffordshire (Burton-on-Trent)
Eastbourne
Exeter
Gloucester
Great Yarmouth
Hastings
Ipswich
Lincoln
Northampton
Norwich
Oxford
Preston
Worcester.

There are no current plans to extend the system of unitary authorities.

Dog Fouling

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost to local authorities of fully implementing the dog fouling regulations. [50570]

Angela Eagle: It is for local authorities to decide whether to implement the regulations in the light of local priorities and resources. No estimate has been made of the cost to those local authorities who have done so. But administrative savings are expected compared to the byelaw system which required local authorities to seek the Secretary of State's confirmation to introduce "poop scoop" areas.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from local authorities relating to the implementation of the dog fouling regulations. [50569]

Angela Eagle: Representations on a number of issues have been received from local authorities relating to the implementation of the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996. Apart from procedural questions about implementation, the representations also address issues such as the ability of local authorities to retain the £25 fixed penalty fine, the provision of bins and the disposal of dog waste, and the designation of populated rural areas where speed limits are 40mph and above.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the draft of the Greater London Authority Bill. [50674]

Mr. Raynsford: Following the overwhelming endorsement of our proposals in the referendum on 7 May, we have made it clear that we intend to introduce legislation to establish the Greater London Authority as soon as the legislative timetable permits. We do not intend to publish a draft Bill before the legislation is introduced.

Garden Land

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the appeal decisions for 1996–97 and 1997–98 where one of the grounds for refusal was the protection of garden land. [50363]

Mr. Raynsford: I have asked the Chief Planning Inspector, Mr. Chris Shepley, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from David Hanchet to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 15 July 1998:

The Secretary of state has asked me to reply to your Question about appeal decisions where one of the grounds for refusal was the protection of garden land.

I enclose details of 4 appeals which were dismissed in 1996–97 and 15 which were dismissed in 1997–98. I believe this is an exhaustive list but I cannot be certain, especially as we do not have a separate refusal issue relating to protection of garden land. The details include the issues considered to be relevant to the Inspectors decision.

I am arranging for copies of the Inspector's decision letters to be sent to you. From these you will be able to see whether the Inspector agreed or disagreed with any reasons for refusal by the local authority.

Details of the appeals have been made available in the Library.

Air and Water Quality

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the quantity and quality of public information on *(a)* air quality and *(b)* water quality. [49009]

Angela Eagle: My Department and the Environment Agency strive continuously to improve the quantity and quality of information on air and water quality made available to the public.

My Department's standard of dissemination of air pollution information is amongst the best in the world. Hourly information on a range of air pollutants, together with a forecast, is made available to the public via CEEFAX, TELETEXT, the Internet, by Freephone and the media. The National Air Quality Archive, containing all data collected in the Department's national networks, is freely available on the Internet, together with statistical summaries and a wide range of supplementary information. My Department also regularly publishes research reports on ambient concentrations and emissions of air pollutants in the UK. In addition, my Department publishes a number of leaflets for the public on air quality issues. It is my intention to continue to make as much information on air pollution available to the public as possible.

The Drinking Water Inspectorate publishes an Annual Report on drinking water quality in England and Wales; a non-technical leaflet about its role which contains key statistics on drinking water quality; and simple leaflets reporting drinking water quality for each water company. It has also produced leaflets on lead in drinking water; chlorine, smell and taste; and problems with drinking water. All leaflets are available free of charge from the Inspectorate or through the Internet. Their content and style have been reviewed and improved following market research. More detailed information on the results of all compliance tests for drinking water quality is available for inspection on public records held by water companies.

The Environment Agency recently published a report, *The State of the Environment of England and Wales: Fresh Waters*, and will be producing a similar report on the coastal environment. Data on water quality are made publicly available through the Agency's public registers. Information on water quality and water resources is available in the *State of the Environment* section on the Agency's Internet site, which is being extended. The network of 7,000 monitoring sites to monitor water quality is the most comprehensive in Europe. The Agency is currently reviewing its monitoring activities to ensure that they respond to changing needs.

Air quality and water quality data are also published in the annual *Digest of Environmental Statistics* and summary booklet *The Environment in your Pocket*, which is distributed widely to schools and others. Measures of air and water quality are likely to be included in the set of indicators that will accompany the revised sustainable development strategy.

Gas-fired Power Stations

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the effect on carbon dioxide emissions of the Government's moratorium on the building of gas-fired power stations. [50212]

Angela Eagle: The preliminary conclusions of the Government's Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation reaffirm the Government's determination to meet their climate change targets and state that the proposals are consistent with a decline in carbon emissions from the electricity generating industry.

National Stadium

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes have been made to the design specification of the National Stadium at Wembley in response to the proposals for athletics facilities to be built within the Millennium Dome. [49654]

Mr. Banks: I have been asked to reply.

There are a number of proposals for the long term use for the Dome which have been put forward, including the creation of a sports arena for participation and spectator sports. However, the requirements for an athletics capability at the National Stadium have not changed.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Environmental Policies

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of his Department's waste is recycled; and what targets he has set for increasing this figure. [50103]

Mr. Fatchett: At present we estimate we are recycling about 15 per cent. of our waste paper. A further 25 per cent. is incinerated by Westminster City Council and used for power generation. At our Hanslope Park site we recycle 60 per cent. of our cardboard for packaging material.

We plan, by the year 2000, to increase the percentage of waste that is recycled to 33 per cent. in the London estate and 19 per cent. at Hanslope Park.

By 2005 we are looking to reduce our solid waste to landfill by 40 per cent. This is in line with the White Paper: A Strategy for Sustainable Waste Management.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures he has introduced to discourage car use by his Department's employees. [50088]

Mr. Fatchett: We operate the following measures to discourage car use:

(i) An assisted travel scheme coach service for employees at our out of town site at Hanslope Park, near Milton Keynes.

(ii) We have increased the number of cycle spaces at our Whitehall Main Building by 31 per cent.

(iii) As part of our Green Transport Plan, we expect to decrease the number of car parking spaces at our Whitehall Main Building. This is in line with the DETR initiative to reduce staff parking at Government Buildings in London.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the current energy consumption of his Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what plans he has to include energy efficiency performance figures in his Department's annual report. [50093]

Mr. Fatchett: Our current energy consumption is:

1997–98 figures

	kWh
Whitehall district heating system	6,084,631
Electricity	17,881,626
Gas	6,717,265
Fuel oil	4,524,791

We are striving to reduce our energy consumption in line with the DETR recommendations of a 20 per cent. improvement over 1990 levels by 31 March 2000.

We plan to include our energy efficiency performance figures in our Department's Annual Report once our accommodation strategy has been realised in 2001. Part of the aim of the strategy is to reduce our energy consumption significantly by rationalising our estate.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to raise awareness of environmental issues within his Department; and what training will be made available. [50102]

Mr. Fatchett: We operate a Monitoring and Targeting (M & T) system which reports on energy and water use throughout the estate and highlights areas of waste.

Information from the M & T system was used as the basis for a "Powerdown" poster campaign.

We encourage our Energy and Environment Officers to undertake relevant training.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what environmental activities his Green Minister has undertaken since being appointed. [50101]

Mr. Fatchett: The UK has much to contribute to international action on the environment. This is a top priority for the entire Ministerial team in the FCO, working closely with their DETR counterparts. Protection of the environment was, for example, a key theme of the UK's Presidency of the European Union.

I am the FCO's Green Minister. I have responsibility among FCO Ministers to ensure that we make the most of all opportunities to promote the UK's international environmental objectives, including in multilateral and bilateral meetings, and in the activities of UK diplomatic missions overseas. For example, the environment was a key theme of the ASEM 2 Summit in April. As Green Minister, I am also responsible for ensuring that the administration of the FCO itself takes full account of environmental considerations. I have recently committed the FCO to greater use of environmentally friendly means of transport. The FCO is now exploring the use of Liquified Petroleum Gas (LPG) vehicles.

Former Yugoslavia

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take steps to ensure that the United Nations and the EU instruct commercial banks to reveal the existence of accounts holding assets from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [50350]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Bank accounts of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia remain frozen pending the resolution of succession negotiations which are continuing under the auspices of the High Representative's special negotiator. UK banks and other financial institutions holding assets which are subject to the resolution of third party claims are not required under current legislation to reveal their existence. We have no plans to ask the United Nations or the EU to intervene in this matter.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the total number of legal aid applications over the past three years for *(a)* criminal and *(b)* civil cases; and how many were refused. [50362]

Mr. Hoon: Information on criminal legal aid is broken down into proceedings in the Crown Court and the magistrate's court. The number of applications made, granted and refused in the magistrate's court for representation in that court is not available. The number of applications made for representation in the Crown Court were as follows:

Year	*Applications made*	*Applications granted*	*Applications refused*
1995	126,897	126,658	239
1996	116,721	116,443	278
1997	124,711	124,491	220

The figures include both applications made in the magistrate's court for representation in the Crown Court and applications made direct to the Crown Court.

Civil legal aid is administered by the Legal Aid Board. The table sets out the number of legal aid applications received, granted and refused in the last three calender years.

Year	*Applications made*	*Applications granted*	*Applications refused*
1995	516,654	462,657	53,997
1996	484,074	426,023	58,051
1997	444,538	382,501	62,037

DEFENCE

Defence Vetting Agency

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Vetting Agency for 1998–99. [51187]

Mr. Spellar: The Defence Vetting Agency was launched on 1 April 1997 with a staff of about 350 MOD Civil Servants, located in Central London, Portsmouth, Woolwich and Corsham, Wiltshire. Its formation brought together four existing Ministry of Defence Vetting

Authorities. The Agency undertakes some 130,000 vetting checks and investigations each year. In addition, it is engaged on an ambitious programme of work to become an integrated, modern, efficient organisation, based on a single site. The Agency's first year has been characterised by planning and setting in train a series of key studies. These include:

a. A collocation investment appraisal;

b. A business process reengineering and reorganisation study;

c. An information systems strategy study; and

d. A Private Finance Initiative feasibility study.

This second year will see the beginning of the implementation of these various initiatives.

The Chief Executive has been set the following Key Targets:

Quality

Key Target 1—To maintain quality standards through at least 95 per cent. compliance with agreed procedures, and to develop quality improvement targets in the light of a Defence wide customer survey.

Timeliness

Key Target 2—To complete 85 per cent. of Security Checks within 6 weeks.

Key Target 3—To complete 71 per cent. of Counter Terrorist Checks within 6 weeks.

Key Target 4—To complete 85 per cent. of all Developed Vetting clearances within 6 months.

Key Target 5—To reduce the 1997–98 average times for Security Checks, Counter Terrorist Checks and Developed Vetting clearances by 5 per cent.

Efficiency

Key Target 6—To reduce the FY97–98 Unit Cost of Output.

I have arranged for advance copies of the Corporate Plan to be placed in the Library of both Houses.

British Army of the Rhine

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British soldiers are part of the British Army of the Rhine; and what was the total cost of their military presence in the last financial year for which figures are available. [50254]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The British Army of the Rhine is no longer in existence. The British Army in Germany consists of the 1st (UK) Armoured Division, a Combat Service Support Group and a Support Command, with some other minor units.

As at 31 May 1998, there were some 23,800 posts directly administered or associated with the Army garrisoned in Germany. This excludes the various NATO headquarters and other posts distinct from the garrisons, but includes those troops who are based in Germany and deployed elsewhere, for example the Former Yugoslavia. The cost of these forces during 1997–98 was some £1,139 million.

The Strategic Defence Review has examined ways to achieve a better balance between forces based in Britain and Germany. We have concluded that we should remove some 2,500 troops as part of the wider restructuring of the Army. This will take some years to complete.

Russia (Joint Exercises)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Army conducted joint exercises with the Russian army during the last five years. [48575]

Mr. George Robertson: The British Army has not conducted any joint exercises with the Russian Army during the last five years.

Millennium Compliance

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures have been taken by his Department to ensure that defence systems will not be compromised by the millennium bug. [49487]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence began work to address the millennium date change problem in 1995, with a study to assess the scope of the problem within the Department. The work to fix or replace systems which are not compliant commenced early in 1996. This programme of work encompasses the full range of MOD equipment, including office equipment, and information and weapon systems. Issues that affect interoperability with our allies are being carefully considered. The MOD has actively promoted awareness of this issue internationally through briefings in NATO, and bilateral discussions with the US Department of Defense and with other international partners.

The MOD reports progress on its Year 2000 programme to the Cabinet Office. The MOD reports form part of the quarterly statement made to Parliament by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, whose last report was made on the 8 June 1998. Copies of the MOD reports are placed in the Library of the House and I would refer the hon. Member to them. These reports are also available on the Cabinet Office Year 2000 Web site.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many research contracts and agreements in universities are currently being funded by the Atomic Weapons Establishment; what is the total value of these research projects; how many of these research projects are classified; and if he will list the universities at which these research projects are being funded. [49990]

Mr. Spellar: The Atomic Weapons Establishment currently has twenty six research contracts and agreements with universities. The total value of these contracts, none of which is classified, is £2.2 million. I will write to my hon. Friend as to the actual universities involved and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Meetings

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what meetings he had with Labour hon. Members in the course of his official duties on 1 July. [50451]

Mr. George Robertson: During the course of my official duties on Wednesday 1 July, I attended meetings of the Labour Party 'Britain in the World' Policy

Commission, and the Parliamentary Labour Party Defence Committee. During both of these meetings, hon. Members were present.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Casino Deregulation

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on casino deregulation. [51016]

Mr. George Howarth: I am pleased to announce our conclusions on casino deregulation.

Casino membership and advertising

We intend to bring forward proposals to allow

postal applications for membership of casinos;

group membership; and

limited factual advertising.

These will be the first gambling deregulation proposals to be brought forward under this Government. The previous administration consulted on similar proposals in November 1996[1]. They announced on 13 March 1997 that the proposals had broad support and were suitable for a deregulation order, but the General Election intervened before that work could be taken forward.

We will need to consult afresh because some changes are appropriate in the light of the earlier consultation. In particular, it was previously proposed to allow advertising only in non-national publications. We think this would be unduly restrictive and difficult to enforce. We propose to allow factual advertising in national publications.

The procedures for deregulation orders require consultation on specific proposals before an order can be laid. The consultation paper will give full details of the proposals. They have been agreed in principle by the Gaming Board and the British Casino Association.

We have also discussed the advertising proposals with the Advertising Association and the Advertising Standards Authority.

The consultation paper will be published in the next few weeks. Subject to the outcome, we expect to lay deregulation proposals in the autumn for scrutiny by the Deregulation Committees.

We acknowledge the comments made by the previous Deregulation Committees to the effect that the gambling law is complex and that some previous deregulation orders have increased that complexity. They called for a general overhaul and consolidation of the gambling legislation. I have discussed these concerns with the Chairmen of the current Committees. It was recognised that general gambling reform would be a large undertaking, involving three main Acts of Parliament—the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963, the Gaming Act 1968 and the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976. There is a case for such an exercise, but we are not able to take it forward in the short term, and we propose meanwhile to continue to use the deregulation process to make appropriate, selective changes.

We have also considered the other casino proposals consulted on in November 1996—for slot machines and permitted areas. We have no fundamental objections to some change in these areas, but we will need to consider further the resource issues.

Slot machines

The November 1996 paper recommended the introduction of casino slot machines with unlimited prizes. We have concluded that;

In principle, there should be no objection to casinos, which are premises expressly licensed for hard gambling, having the same type of slot machines as are common in casinos in other countries;

But there should be a staged approach with a smaller number of machines initially, to allow the impact to be assessed. A maximum of 20 machines per casino would be the most suitable figure;

However, at a time of pressure on public expenditure, it is not clear how the necessary additional funding could be found for the Gaming Board to supervise a new slot machines regime;

Discussions on machines are continuing within Government and with the Gaming Board and the casino industry.

Jackpot machines

In the meantime, following a recommendation by the Gaming Board, we have agreed in principle to make regulations with effect from 1 October 1998 to increase the maximum prize for jackpot machines in casinos from £250 to £1,000 and the maximum stake from 30p to 50p. These proposals arise from the triennial review of machine stake and prize limits, full details of which I am announcing separately today.

At present, casinos are allowed up to six jackpot machines. The number was increased from two to six machines in June 1996 by deregulation order. I consider that a further modest increase would be appropriate, and will include in the consultation paper a proposal that casinos may have up to ten such machines.

Permitted areas

The previous Government also proposed allowing casinos in additional areas, to be implemented by secondary legislation. It was made clear at the time that no timetable for implementation could be set because of the resource implications for the Gaming Board and the courts.

We have carefully considered the case for additional areas. We have concluded that Great Britain is already well served with casinos and that there is not a compelling case for a large extension to that provision. The pressure for additional casinos has come mainly from the industry or individual local authorities rather than the general public. There are already 53 permitted areas. The previous proposals would have added 21. We do not consider it appropriate to designate so many additional areas, particularly those which do not have a significant resident population. Further work would need to be done on the criteria; and additional funding would need to be found for the Gaming Board and the courts. In the light of other, more pressing priorities, we have decided not to take forward any changes for the time being.

We may wish to make proposals for a small number of additional areas in the future. There would need to be a good case on population grounds, and any proposal would also need local authority and public support.

[1] Home Office paper entitled Second Consultation on Casino Deregulation.

Gaming Machines

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce the outcome of the triennial review of gaming machine stake and prize limits. [51017]

Mr. George Howarth: The Gaming Board have reviewed machine stake and prize limits and made recommendations to the Home Office.

We have accepted their recommendations. I intend to make the necessary statutory instruments to come into force on 1 October.

The following maximum stake and prize limits will apply:

- the all-cash amusement-with-prizes (AWP) machine prize will be increased from £10 to £15;
- the prizes for the cash/token AWP machines will be left unchanged at £5 for the cash and £8 for the non monetary prizes;
- the prizes for jackpot machines will be increased from £250 to £500 in bingo clubs and £1,000 in casinos; and left unchanged at £250 in members clubs; and
- the 30p stake for AWP machines will be left unchanged and that for jackpot machines will be increased to 50p.

The Gaming Board's main underlying thinking, which we endorse, is to: keep machines to which children are allowed access at low prize levels; work with the industry to prevent children gaining access to all-cash machines, with the prospect of a more liberal future regime if that can be achieved; and recognise that higher prizes are appropriate in gambling clubs.

I have placed in the Library the Gaming Board's report of their review, which explains in detail the consultation with interested organisations and their conclusions.

Pheasants (Plastic Blinkers)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy in respect of the use of plastic blinkers on pheasants; and if he will make a statement. [50213]

Mr. George Howarth: Pheasants are protected by the Protection of Animals Act 1911, which makes it an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to any captive or domestic animal. Any person may initiate proceedings under this Act where there is reason to believe that unnecessary suffering has been caused, or may report the matter to the police who will decide whether or not to institute a prosecution.

Pheasants kept on agricultural land for the production of food are further protected by the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968, which makes it an offence to cause unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to any livestock. The Welfare of Livestock (Prohibited Operations) Regulations 1982 made under this Act prohibit the fitting of any appliance which has the object or effect of limiting vision to a bird by a method involving the penetration or other mutilation of the nasal septum, except in an emergency or by a veterinary surgeon when disease or injury is present and proper treatment requires the operation.

Asylum Detainees

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were being held in detention in England and Wales, pending the hearing of their asylum appeal on 6 July. [49527]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is that, as at 30 June 1998, there were 166 men and 15 women detained solely under Immigration Act powers in the United Kingdom who had sought asylum at some stage and who were awaiting the hearing or determination of an appeal.

These figures are approximate because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large numbers of persons detained for only a short period.

Asylum Officials

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of his Department's officials and at what grades are currently processing asylum applications; and what were the equivalent figures in May 1997. [49876]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table:

	Number
1 June 1998	
Senior Executive Officer	13
Higher Executive Officer	50
Executive Officer	179
Administrative Officer	114
Administrative Assistant	130
Total	[1]486
1 May 1997	
Senior Executive Officer	22
Higher Executive Officer	79
Executive Officer	273
Administrative Officer	149
Administrative Assistant	161
Total	684

[1] This figure excludes 45 members of staff who now form part of the Asylum and Appeals Policy Directorate

These figures reflect the re-deployment of staff in preparation for the computerisation and integration of the caseworking functions.

Asylum Applications

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications have been *(a)* determined and *(b)* left outstanding in each of the last 18 months. [49956]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Initial decisions on asylum applications and applications outstanding, December 1996 to May 1998—number of principal applicants

Month/year	Number of decisions in each month	Applications outstanding at end of each month
1996		
December	2,530	57,405
1997		
January	3,260	56,640
February	3,090	55,820
March	2,845	54,950
April	3,390	54,020
May	2,880	53,545
June	2,930	53,025
July	3,480	52,420
August	2,980	52,240
September	2,800	52,130
October	3,035	51,910
November	2,990	51,150
December	2,355	51,795
1998		
January	3,065	51,445
February	3,035	50,960
March	3,070	50,950
April	2,520	51,465
May	2,360	52,110

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest 5

Bogus Charity Collectors

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prosecutions there have been in the London and south east regions, by constabulary, for offences in connection with bogus street collections in each of the last three years for which figures are available; [50322]

(2) if he will advise television and radio broadcasters to take adequate precautions against bogus charity collectors taking part in telethons and radio appeal days; [50324]

(3) if he will take steps to warn retailers about bogus charity collectors who apply for permission to collect on retail premises and in shopping malls. [50323]

Mr. Michael: Information collected centrally on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not distinguish offences committed under the Police, Factories Etc. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1916 and the House to House Collections Act 1939 from other summary offences.

The Charity Commission meets regularly with licensing authorities and seeks to co-operate with any requests for information about charities or fund-raising organisations. The Commission encourages owners of retail premises to check with them if they have any doubts about an organisation seeking permission to carry out a charitable collection. Basic details of all registered charities can also be checked on the Commission's website at htpp://www.charity-commission.gov.uk.

There are many charities connected with NHS Trusts. Checks with a number of Trusts have revealed that, generally, hospitals allow only these charities to collect on their property.

Probation Service (Derbyshire)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements will be made to accommodate the local Probation Service and to provide its services in South Derbyshire, and at what cost, following the proposed closure of Swadlincote Magistrates Court. [49747]

Ms Quin: The Derbyshire probation service have decided to await the outcome of the appeal against the closure of the magistrates' court before making a decision about replacement accommodation in Swadlincote. Following the outcome of this and the Prisons-Probation Review, Derbyshire probation service will be reviewing their provision and accommodation needs before deciding whether to acquire or lease new accommodation in Swadlincote. The cost of such accommodation would depend on local property market conditions at the time.

Child Pornography

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been in England and Wales in each of the last three years for offences involving the use of children in the production of pornography. [50104]

Mr. Michael: Available information from the Home Office Court Proceedings database is given in the table.

Number of persons prosecuted for child pornography offences, England and Wales, 1994–96

Offence	1994		1995		1996	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Take, make, distribute, show, possess with intent to distribute or show, or publish any advertisement conveying the distribution of indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of children[1]	37	3	49	4	80	—
Possession of an indecent photograph or pseudo-photograph of a child[2]	53	—	59	1	122	3

[1] Protection of Children Act 1978 S1, 6 as amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 S84

[2] Criminal Justice Act 1988 S160 as amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 S84(4) and 86(1)

Bookmaking

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what share of the turnover of the off-course bookmaking industry was constituted by bets not made at starting prices in the last year for which figures are available. [50148]

Mr. George Howarth: The Home Office does not have figures on ante-post or early price fixed odds betting. However, betting on horserace pools accounted for less than 2 per cent. of off-course turnover in 1997.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used by local magistrates when determining applications for the opening of a licensed bookmaking office. [50155]

Mr. George Howarth: Under Schedule 1 to the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963, an applicant to run a licensed betting office must first apply for a betting permit, obtainable if the magistrates are satisfied they are a fit and proper person, and the premises must comply with statutory access requirements.

The magistrates may refuse a licence if they are not satisfied that the premises are suitable or if they consider there are already sufficient betting offices in the locality to satisfy demand for betting facilities.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48660]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Drugs

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he plans to take to tackle drug issues in rural environments. [50335]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government's drug strategy set out in the White Paper "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain" gives Drug Action Teams the responsibility for drawing up action plans in the light of local circumstances and for identifying and allocating resources to match priority aims and actions for their areas. Guidance for Drug Action Teams on drawing up their action plans will be issued later this year.

Fire Service

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations he has received and from which bodies over the apparent reduction in mains water pressures by some water companies; what assessment he has made of the extent of the problems; and what assessment he has made of the potential effect upon the Fire Service's fire fighting capability; [50082]

(2) what arrangements are in place for ensuring that fire authorities are satisfactorily discharged from obligations under Section 13 of the Fire Services Act 1947. [50081]

Mr. George Howarth: Representations have been made by the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association and the Local Government Association. The problems appear to be limited. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has established a National Liaison Group with representatives of the water industry, the Fire Service and the Home Office to improve communications at national and local levels. The Group is producing a code of practice which will provide guidance to water companies and the Fire Service on issues relating to water for firefighting. The code should help fire authorities discharge their statutory duty under section 13 and ensure the supply of water for firefighting.

Police (Boundaries)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if, as part of the review of the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police area, he will review the overlapping jurisdictions of the Metropolitan Police, City of London Police and the British Transport Police; and if he will make a statement. [50574]

Mr. Michael: My right hon. Friend has concluded his consideration of the case for changing the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police District. He announced in a written answer to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), 16 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *191*, that a provision would be made in the Greater London Authority Bill to make those boundaries coterminous with those of the 32 London boroughs.

There are no plans to change the boundaries between the Metropolitan Police District and the City of London Police.

The British Transport Police has responsibility for railway policing throughout Great Britain, and its jurisdiction cuts across all force boundaries. It did not fall to be considered in the context of the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police District.

Pedestrian Accidents

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* children and *(b)* adults were (i) killed, (ii) seriously injured and (iii) slightly injured on or near pedestrian crossings in (1) the Metropolitan Police area of London and (2) England and Wales in (A) 1994, (B) 1995, (C) 1996 and (D) 1997. [50223]

Dr. Strang *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is shown in the following table:

Pedestrian casualties on or near a pedestrian crossing[1]

Location of accident	*Age of casualty*	*Severity*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Metropolitan Police Area	Child (0–15)	Fatal	2	1	1	3
		Serious	109	127	132	153
		Slight	495	410	464	503
		Total	606	538	597	659
	Adult (16+)	Fatal	44	25	38	52
		Serious	469	428	443	486
		Slight	1,400	1,244	1,375	1,585
		Total	1,913	1,697	1,856	2,123
	All ages[2]	Fatal	47	27	41	55
		Serious	625	604	617	677
		Slight	2,105	1,831	1,965	2,222
		Total	2,777	2,462	2,623	2,954
England and Wales	Child (0–15)	Fatal	17	14	9	14
		Serious	436	434	452	445
		Slight	1,728	1,654	1,727	1,778
		Total	2,181	2,102	2,188	2,237
	Adult (16+)	Fatal	153	114	132	132
		Serious	1,352	1,278	1,312	1,296
		Slight	3,645	3,478	3,646	3,729
		Total	5,150	4,870	5,090	5,157
	All ages[2]	Fatal	171	129	143	146
		Serious	1,844	1,766	1,812	1,781
		Slight	5,621	5,354	5,546	5,686
		Total	7,636	7,249	7,501	7,613

[1] Includes pedestrians on a crossing, on the zig zags of a crossing or within 50 metres of a crossing
[2] Includes pedestrian casualties whose age is unknown

WALES

Complementary Medicine

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the potential benefits of complementary medicine in Wales. [49560]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The Government recognise that some people with conditions that do not respond to orthodox treatment can be helped by forms of complementary and alternative medicine, and has sponsored research into the use of complementary medicine in general practice. GPs and hospital doctors may arrange for their patients to receive any of the complementary medicine treatments if they feel it is clinically necessary, and is the most appropriate method of treating the particular health need. The doctor should also take into account the patient's wishes, evidence of the safety and effectiveness of the treatment, and its cost and availability locally.

Community Pharmacists

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent consultations he has had with community pharmacists in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [49564]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Although I have held no recent consultations with community pharmacists, departmental officials have regular meetings with them. I am prepared to meet pharmacists myself if there are particular matters of concern which they wish to raise with me.

Out-of-town Shopping Centres

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the number of out-of-town shopping centres in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [49566]

Mr. Win Griffiths: This information is not held centrally. Government planning policy on retailing in Wales is set out in 'Planning Guidance (Wales) Planning Policy' published in May 1996. This includes a commitment to sustain and enhance town centres, and to subject proposals for new retail development to a rigorous test designed to favour town centre sites.

"Pathway to Prosperity"

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the nineteenth century institutions alluded to by him in paragraph 8.18 of the document "Pathway to Prosperity", a new economic agenda for Wales, published recently by his Department. [50216]

Mr. Hain: I will write to my right hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *557–58*, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in the current session would affect women; what consultation he had with women's organisations; and if he will make a statement. [49088]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The National Lottery White Paper, 'The People's Lottery' was subject to a wide ranging consultation process, which included women's organisations.

Arts Spending

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the total amount of public spending on the arts for each of the last five years in *(a)* London, *(b)* the North West and *(c)* Warrington. [50036]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Arts funding from my Department is channelled through the Arts Council of England. The Arts Council of England has provided the following figures:

£

Year	*London*	*North West*	*Warrington*
1993–94	10,563,560	5,093,490	21,525
1994–95	13,677,600	7,750,453	19,940
1995–96	14,270,209	8,099,977	19,500
1996–97	14,275,176	8,028,610	18,374
1997–98	14,480,886	8,441,000	25,841

From March 1995 to May 1998, 1,157 projects in London totalling £186.141m received National Lottery arts funding. In the North West Region, 647 projects totalling £51.862m received arts Lottery funding in the same period. 14 awards totalling £2,602,135 were made in the Warrington area.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sudan

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much humanitarian aid the Government have given to *(a)* the Sudan Government, *(b)* charities working in the Sudan and *(c)* directly to the people of Sudan over the last six months. [50552]

Clare Short: Since February, we have committed over £25 million to Sudan, all of which is for the direct benefit of vulnerable people in Sudan. Of this, we have contributed £1.83 million to Non-Governmental Organisations and £1 million towards the International Committee of the Red Cross. We have contributed £16 million to World Food Programme, £0.8 million to UNICEF, £0.4 million to Operation Lifeline Sudan logistics and £0.2 million to the UN Humanitarian Co-ordination Unit in Khartoum. There is £5 million still to be allocated as new needs emerge, whether in the north or the south of the country. No British aid is channelled through Government of Sudan structures.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to raise awareness of environmental issues within her Department; and what training will be made available. [50091]

Clare Short: In addition to the White Paper, which mainstreamed environmental aspects of the sustainable development agenda, Department for International Development (DFID) has produced a range of policy and information documents covering environmental and natural resource issues which *inter alia* serve to raise staff awareness of environmental issues. A DFID Environmental Policy Statement is currently being drafted which will expand on policies outlined in the White Paper. We have also developed a number of documents related to specific areas of the environment in developing countries, including forests, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, desertification and (jointly with DETR) energy efficiency and climate change. These papers are regularly revised and updated.

DFID produces its own *Manual of Environmental Appraisal* which provides guidance to staff so that they can appraise and manage the environmental impacts of DFID's programmes and projects. The Manual also has a role in raising general awareness of environmental issues within DFID, and it is currently undergoing revision to expand coverage of policy issues and improve user-friendliness. DFID is currently reviewing training needs in environmental issues and appraisal, in line with the revision of the *Manual of Environmental Appraisal.*

DFID written guidance and policy documentation is supported by the work of a team of 44 Environmental and Natural Resources Advisers, based both in the UK and overseas, who offer advice to project officers and policy administrators.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures she has put forward to discourage car use by her Department's employees. [50100]

Clare Short: We are considering possible measures in the context of the Green Transport Plan for DFID.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what environmental activities her green minister has undertaken since being appointed. [50092]

Clare Short: Since his appointment as the Department for International Development's Green Minister, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has undertaken a wide range of activities related to this part of his portfolio. At the "Green Ministers' Awayday" in December 1997 he gave a presentation on the Department's *Manual of Environmental Appraisal*, and he held a bilateral meeting with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment in February this year.

The Under-Secretary has engaged in many other activities related to environmental and broader sustainable development issues. For example, he gave a speech at the first Conference of the Parties to the Convention to Combat Desertification in Rome in December 1997. In October last year, he addressed the pre-CHOGM forum on implementing the UN Habitat Agenda in urban environments, and addressed the World Wide Fund for Nature on the role of government, aid and private investment in sustainable development. This year, he has given a keynote speech to the Indian Energy Conference at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and addressed both the All-Party Parliamentary Water Group and the Amazonia 2000 conference. In addition to these named activities, the Under-Secretary has met a range of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations.

Further details of Green Ministerial activity and official support are available from DFID's Environmental Policy Department.

PRIME MINISTER

Far East (Recession)

Q12. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the implications for the British economy of recession in the Far East. [49059]

The Prime Minister: Developments in Asia pose considerable risks to the world economy. The March 1998 FSBR took account of these developments in Asia in its forecasts for the UK economy, incorporating a reduction in UK GDP growth of up to half a percentage point. The FSBR also emphasised the increased risks to sustained global expansion. The Treasury and the Bank of England continue to monitor the situation closely.

Government Information

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister how many applications for information from *(a)* his Office and *(b)* the Office of Public Service have been made since 1 May 1997 under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information; what areas of work the applications covered; and how many applications have been turned down. [47880]

Dr. David Clark: I have been asked to reply.

Details of all requests made under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information during the 1997 calendar year are set out in the 1997 Report on its operations which I published on 11 June. A copy is in the House Library.

The Code applies to, and informs the handling of, all requests for information to Government departments but for the purpose of monitoring, a Code request is defined as:

- a request which specifically mentions the Code; or
- a request for which a charge or standard fee is paid; or
- a request for which information is refused under one or more Code exemptions.

On this basis, the Office of Public Service received eight applications for information under the Code during the 1997 calendar year, of which two were turned down. No central record is kept of the areas of work concerned. The scope of the Code is based on the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 and although the Prime Minister's Office is not legally bound by this Act the Government have made it clear that they will treat requests for information to No. 10 as if they were covered by the Code.

SOCIAL SECURITY

UN Families Day

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what initiatives the Government took to promote the UN International Day of Families on 15 May. [47223]

Mr. Field: The Ministerial Group on the Family has been considering various measures to support families. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make an announcement later in July.

Child Support

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the timescale for the introduction of child maintenance premium. [49992]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The child maintenance premium will be introduced as part of a wider package of reforms set out in the Green Paper "Children First—a new approach to child support" (Cm 3992). Where assessments are made under the new scheme, families on Income Support will be allowed to keep up to £10 a week of any maintenance which is paid for their children. Because of the scale of the legislative and operational change, these arrangements are unlikely to be introduced before 2001. The Green Paper invites views on the options for transferring existing cases to the new scheme.

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals she has for reassessing arrears on payments when the proposed new formula for maintenance payments takes effect. [49744]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Non-resident parents have a responsibility to support their children, including paying for their upkeep.

We are not proposing any reassessment of arrears due under the current formula on the introduction of a new child support scheme, as proposed in the Green Paper "Children First: a new approach to child support" (Cm 3992). Non-resident parents will be expected to pay the amounts calculated under the present arrangements and appropriate collection and enforcement action will be taken if there are outstanding arrears.

Child Support Agency

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the increase in the number of absent fathers who will pay their maintenance assessment as a result of the proposed simplification of the operation of the Child Support Agency. [49648]

Mr. Keith Bradley: A simpler child support system will mean less time spent assessing maintenance and more time collecting and enforcing payment.

We estimate that the proposals in the Green Paper "Children First: a new Approach to child support" (Cm 3992) will result in an increase in cash compliance from the current level of around 66 per cent. to 80 per cent. or more.

Under the current arrangements only around 200,000 non-resident parents are paying maintenance where the parent with care is on Income Support. We expect this figure to more than double under a simpler scheme.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the number of absent parents whose maintenance assessment will increase as a result of the proposals to reform the Child Support Agency. [49649]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We estimate that around 27 per cent. of non-resident parents in work and with a maintenance assessment under the current formula (about 100,000 based on the current caseload of the Child Support Agency) would have a higher maintenance assessment under the proposals for a simpler formula set

out in the Green Paper "Children First: a new approach to child support" (Cm 3992). Changes in liability for current cases will be phased in.

The Green Paper also proposes that most of the current provisions for exemption from the minimum payment should be abolished. We estimate, in current terms, that this would result in a further 60,000 non-resident parents receiving benefit becoming liable for the minimum payment.

Children will be better-off, financially and emotionally, if non-resident parents meet their responsibilities. Our proposals for a child maintenance premium for parents with care receiving Income Support will mean that children in these families will see a direct financial gain from the payment of maintenance.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in how many cases during the past three years over 12 months has elapsed between making an appeal against a decision concerning disability living allowance, and the outcome of the appeal being decided. [49105]

Mr. Denham: The vast majority of appeals on Disability Living Allowance are heard by Disability Appeal Tribunals. The information requested is not held for these appeals.

However, the Social Security Act 1998, which received Royal Assent on 21 May, paves the way for modernising the delivery of Social Security, including the handling of appeals. A wide range of measures will streamline the administration of appeals and ensure appeals are dealt with more speedily. In particular, the Act enables my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to assume responsibility for the administration of the appeals system. She will set and publish demanding targets for the administration of appeals and report on the results.

Gender Data

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on progress in auditing official statistics to identify gaps in data on gender. [45794]

Ms Ruddock: We need relevant, reliable and timely statistics broken down by gender, comparing all aspects of women's lives and men's lives, to appraise policies for gender differential impacts and to support the process of mainstreaming.

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) aims always to collect and make available statistics disaggregated by gender, except where considerations of practicality or cost outweigh the identified need. All GSS publications contain the name and contact details of a person who can explain which, if any, of the statistics are available by gender and how they can be obtained.

The Brief Guide to Gender Statistics, published jointly by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Office for National Statistics in March 1998, reviews the existing data, which are disaggregated by gender and identify the gaps. A copy has been placed in the Library.

The newly formed Gender and Statistics User Group will be considering this issue further and identifying what can be done to increase and improve the disaggregation of statistics by gender. This Group was launched on 31 March 1998. Until then, there had been no widely based group looking at the production and reporting of official and other statistics covering gender inequalities. The group includes, among others, representatives from women's national organisations, universities, research centres, the unions and Government Departments.

Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she expects to receive the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority's second annual report; and if she will make a statement. [51096]

Ms Harman: I have laid the second report of Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (OPRA) before both Houses today. It covers the first 12 months of OPRA's operations following the take up of its statutory responsibilities on 6 April 1997.

I am pleased to see how quickly OPRA has established itself as an effective regulator of occupational pensions schemes and set up constructive working relationships with the pensions industry. The report raises a number of issues on which there is ongoing action between OPRA and this Department.

National Insurance

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she expects to announce the results of the review into the position of performers for national insurance purposes; and if she will make a statement. [50749]

Mr. Denham: Performers have generally been treated as self-employed by the Inland Revenue, but as employees for National Insurance purposes. We have received legal advice that the current National Insurance treatment is not sustainable, and that entertainers should generally be regarded as self-employed.

Having considered the position we have decided to table regulations that will again require the majority of performers to be treated as employees for National Insurance purposes, whose earnings will be liable to Class 1 contributions. These regulations will be tabled in the near future.

The Government are considering the longer-term position of the entertainment industry, in the light of the plans announced in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget Statement concerning the alignment of tax and National Insurance and will in due course make a further announcement.

It is open to performers and engagers who consider they have incorrectly paid National Insurance Contributions in the belief that workers previously treated as employees

should have been treated as self-employed to apply for a refund. This is limited to contributions made in the last 6 years.

Those who wish to do so should contact:

Ian Halliday
Contributions Agency
Refunds Group
Room 107B
Longbenton
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE98 1YX.

TREASURY

Capital Gains Tax

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the impact on the capital gains tax yield of the changes to the capital gains tax system set out in the Finance (No. 2) Bill in each of the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [49484]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* The available information on the effect on Exchequer revenues of the capital gains tax package of reforms is as follows:

Year	*£ million (+)yield/(−)cost*
1998–99	Negligible
1999–2000	−25
2000–01	+25

For later years, the exchequer effects will depend to a considerable extent upon movements in future asset prices, any behavioural changes and other factors. In the long term, the aim is for the changes to be broadly revenue neutral.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate his Department has made of the number of people who will benefit from the application of the new taper relief for capital gains tax on the sale of second homes in each of the next 10 years; [49518]

(2) what estimates his Department has made of the cost to public funds of applying capital gains tax taper relief to the sale of second homes in each of the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [49517]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* The information required to make such estimates is not readily available.

Income Tax

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total cost to the Exchequer of administering income tax in the last year for which figures are available; what was the cost 10 years ago; what trend is forecast for this cost; and if he will make a statement. [49476]

Mrs. Liddell: In 1997–98, the total cost of administering income tax was £1,190 million. In 1987–88, the cost was £740 million. (All figures rounded to the nearest £10m).

Future costs of administering income tax depend on a number of factors, not least government priorities and developments in tax policy. However, it is expected that, once the new system of self-assessment is fully bedded in, the administration of the income tax system will be more efficient than in the past.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to taxpayers of employing tax accountants in the last financial year in respect of income tax collection; what was the figure 10 years ago; what trend is forecast for this cost; and if he will make a statement. [49480]

Mrs. Liddell: The reasons why taxpayers employ agents to deal with their tax affairs vary, and are subject to personal choice. For this reason, the Inland Revenue does not collect information of this nature, nor has it any plans to do so.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the cost of countering income tax evasion for the last year for which figures are available; what was the cost 10 years previously; what trend is forecast for such costs; and if he will make a statement. [49481]

Mrs. Liddell: In 1997–98, the cost of countering income tax evasion was about £160 million. In 1987–88, the cost was £80 million. (All figures are rounded to the nearest £10m).

It is expected that spending on compliance will be higher in 1998–99 than in 1997–98, as the introduction of self-assessment will mean a switch of resources from work on returns prior to making an assessment to checks made later and recorded as compliance work. However, longer-term trends are dependent on a number of factors, not least government priorities and developments in tax policy.

Inflation

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact of recent far eastern devaluations on the rate of inflation in the United Kingdom. [49614]

Mrs. Liddell: Developments in Asia are expected to reduce inflation and growth in the G7 economies. Allowance was made for these developments in the Budget forecast for UK inflation set out in the March 1998 Financial Statement and Budget Report (FSBR). But the FSBR also emphasised the risks.

Liquid Propane Gas

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the advantages of reducing the duty on liquid propane gas. [50480]

Mrs. Liddell: The environmental benefits of gas as a road fuel are well known and this has been reflected in the fact that the duty on road fuel gases (liquefied petroleum gas (propane) and liquefied natural gas (methane)) has been frozen for the second Budget in succession. This has increased the differential in favour of road fuel gases in recognition of their environmental benefit and more than fulfilled the pledge to maintain the duty differential with more conventional fuels for the lifetime of this Parliament.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Civil Servants (Information)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what guidance is given to civil servants concerning information which can properly be divulged under Chatham House rules. [50467]

Dr. David Clark *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* There is no specific guidance. All civil servants are under a duty not to disclose, without authority, official information which has been communicated in confidence within Government, or received in confidence from others. They must clear in advance material for publication, broadcasts or other public discussion which draws on official information or experience. Any civil servant participating in outside events—whether under the Chatham House rules or not—should confine their contribution to question of fact and explanation of Government policy and actions.

Public Appointments

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many women have been appointed from the Public Appointments List since 1 May 1997; how this compares with the number of appointments annually in the previous five years; and what is the annual percentage change in the number of appointments of women. [50152]

Dr. David Clark: Since 1 May 1997, the Public Appointments Unit has been notified of 39 appointments held by women nominated from the Central List. Comparative figures for appointments notified to the Unit in previous years are as follows:

Appointment of women from the Public Appointments Unit's Central List

	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98
Number of successful PAU nominees during the year	128	134	180	105	96	87
Of these, number of women	67	71	87	47	41	32
Annual percentage change	+17.5	+6	+22.5	−46	−12.8	−22

[1] Financial years

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Residential Accommodation

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee how many officers of the House are provided with residential accommodation; and where is the accommodation that is provided. [50072]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Apart from the Speaker, four Officers of the House are required by their terms and conditions of employment to live within the parliamentary estate, and are provided with residential accommodation accordingly.

Veal

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee what steps he takes to ensure that veal on sale within Refreshment Department outlets does not come from animals reared in veal crates. [49857]

Mr. Dennis Turner: The Refreshment Department has maintained a policy of purchasing only U.K. veal since 1990, when the use of crated methods of raising calves was banned in this country. This purchasing policy ensures that only veal from calves raised in group housing systems, with free access to milk and fibres, is served in the House of Commons dining rooms and cafeterias.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee if he will make it his policy to ensure that no food is for sale within Refreshment Department outlets which contains or has been produced with the aid of genetically modified material. [49858]

Mr. Dennis Turner: The Refreshment Department is aware of the controversy surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food, and contacted all its suppliers earlier this year to investigate the current situation surrounding this matter. The Department's suppliers have generally not been able to guarantee that all foods supplied to the House of Commons are free from genetically modified material. I am advised that the main cause of concern is the use of soya bean derivatives, which are used extensively throughout the food processing industry and in the production of animal feedstuffs. The uncertain response of the Department's food suppliers, which is being echoed throughout the food industry, is largely due to the fact that there is no segregation between genetically modified crops and non-genetically modified crops in the United States.

I would remind the hon. Member that all genetically modified materials currently used in the UK have been approved for use by the Government's own food safety experts. That notwithstanding, the Refreshment Department maintains a policy of not purchasing any food which is identified as containing genetically modified organisms, and will keep this issue under close review with their food suppliers.

Organic Produce

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee what is his policy in respect of the availability for sale of organic produce within Refreshment Department outlets; what organic produce is currently obtained; and if he will make a statement. [49859]

Mr. Dennis Turner: This is a matter which has been kept under review by the Refreshment Department for several years. At present, the Department does not maintain a specific policy concerning the use of organic foods in its catering operations, but is always pleased to purchase such food when supplies are available in

sufficient quantity, at the right quality and at a price which provides good value for money. One such example is the recent addition to the Refreshment Department's nominated supplier list of the Village Bakery at Melmerby in Cumbria, whose products are certified to be 95 per cent. organic.

There are two particular obstacles to the Refreshment Department instigating a policy of discrimination in favour of the use of organic foods. The first is the difficulty of supply: most organic producers are small organisations which primarily supply into the retail food market and not into the large scale catering market. The second is the question of economics: the cost of organic produce is generally significantly higher than the price of similar non-organic foods and, on occasions where organic produce has been tested, customers of the Refreshment Department have generally demonstrated a reluctance to pay the higher prices necessitated by the use of organic foods. However, I am advised that the Refreshment Department will continue to keep this matter under review.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what target her Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49883]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given him on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*, by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service.

EU Price Indications Directive

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what consultations she has had with small business and retail organisations about the possible exemptions they may enjoy from the terms of the EU price indications directive. [50111]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* In June 1997 my Department conducted wide public consultations, including with small business and retail organisations, about the new Price Indications Directive. This specifically invited views on the exemption from unit pricing which Member States may apply to small retail businesses.

Since then my officials have met representatives of retail organisations, including those representing small retailers, to discuss the implementation of the Directive, including possible exemptions which we may introduce.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will exempt small retail businesses from the provisions of the EU directive on the indication of prices of products offered to consumers. [50117]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Subject to the result of consultations with interested parties, including retailers' organisations and small business organisations, to be carried out later this year, it is my intention to exempt small retail businesses from the requirement to display unit prices for products other than those sold loose from bulk, in accordance with Article 6 of the new Price Indications Directive (98/6/EC). The consultations will also cover other aspects of the Directive relevant to small retail businesses.

Oil and Gas Exploration

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many exploration and appraisal wells were started each year on the UK continental shelf in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998; and how many of these wells were committed through licensing agreements; and what assessment she has made of the current number of uncommitted wells. [50126]

Mr. Battle: The number of exploration and appraisal wells started on the UK Continental Shelf in 1996, 1997, and 1998 is as follows:

Year	*Exploration wells*	*Appraisal wells*
1996	73	44
1997	61	37
1998 (to 30 June)	23	16

In 1997, 35 of the exploration wells drilled were the result of licence agreements, while 12 of those drilled in 1998 fall into this category. The figures for the 1996 drilling programme are not readily available.

There has been no assessment of the current number of uncommitted wells.

Nuclear Reprocessing

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the implications for the nuclear reprocessing industry in the United Kingdom of the current proposal by BNFL to acquire the nuclear assets and liabilities of Westinghouse plc. [49008]

Mr. Battle: The Westinghouse nuclear businesses which are being acquired by British Nuclear Fuels plc do not engage in reprocessing activities. Westinghouse focus mainly on production of nuclear fuel and on the decommissioning and clean-up of civil and military sites owned by the US Government.

Oil Exploration (Sudan)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which British companies are currently involved in oil exploration in Sudan. [48935]

Mr. Battle: We are not aware of any British Companies exploring for oil in Sudan at this time.

Export Licences

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many export licences have been issued since September 1997 for exports to Turkey by Heckler and Hock; and if she will indicate the ML or PL list number of the equipment covered. [50143]

Mrs. Roche: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the current energy consumption of her Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level to a minimum; and what plans there are for including energy efficiency performance figures in her Department's annual report. [50062]

Mrs. Beckett: The Department's energy consumption (including Executive Agencies) in 1996–97 was 61,361,681 Kwh. The Department is committed to reducing consumption by 20 per cent. from the 1990–91 figure by 2000.

The Department's next annual report will record environmental performance, including energy efficiency performance figures.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of her Department's waste is recycled at present; and what targets there are for increasing this in the future. [50061]

Mrs. Beckett: The Department has in place schemes for recycling paper, toner cartridges, and cans. Major suppliers of IT equipment are required to take back packaging for recycling. The scope for increasing recycling is kept under review.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she is taking to discourage car use on departmental business by her Department's employees. [50063]

Mrs. Beckett: The Department will be producing a green transport policy early next year which will address this issue among others.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Love: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the amount of *(a)* Objective 2 funding and *(b)* Objective 4 funding spent in Greater London broken down by project in each year since that status was granted. [49689]

Mrs. Roche: I have arranged for this information to be placed in the Library of the House.

Insider Dealing

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on how many occasions Mr. Roger Kaye QC and Mr. Hugh Aldous FCA have been contracted to act as inspectors investigating alleged insider dealing. [49432]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* They have only been appointed insider dealing inspectors into the two investigations into the alleged insider dealing in the shares of Anglia Television Group plc.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many reports of investigations into insider dealing carried out under the Financial Services Act 1986 have been published. [48603]

Mrs. Beckett: None.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many persons have been the subject of more than *(a)* one and *(b)* two investigations by her Department into alleged insider dealing. [49568]

Mrs. Beckett: Inspectors are appointed under Section 177 of the Financial Services Act 1986 to investigate dealings in the shares of a particular company not the dealings of specific persons.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make it her policy to publish her Department's inspectors' reports; and if she will make a statement. [48252]

Mrs. Beckett: In relation to public companies it is already the Department's policy to publish reports prepared by Companies Act inspectors if it is in the public interest to do so. However, the reports of insider dealing inspectors are not published. There are strict legal restraints on disclosure of information obtained in such inspections.

Lord Archer

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will seek the agreement of Lady Archer and Broosk Saib to make public details of the evidence they gave to her Department's inspectors investigating the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing. [48920]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no plans to do so.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will seek the agreement of Ms Morgan Thomas to make public details of the evidence she gave to the Department's inspectors investigating the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing. [49433]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* No.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if her Department's inspector's report into the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing carried a recommendation. [49431]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* The report of the inspectors is confidential.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) how many investigations were conducted into alleged insider dealing in Anglia TV shares; when each investigation started and finished; and how many persons were interviewed in each case; [49362]

(2) if the report by her Department's inspectors on the investigations into share dealing in Anglia TV by Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare has been made available to Ministers; [49202]

(3) if she will request Mr. Edmund Lawson QC to review the information now in the public domain concerning the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing with a view to ascertaining whether there are grounds for a fresh investigation; [48605]

(4) if she will seek the consent of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare to publish the report of the investigation into his conduct in respect of share dealing; [48606]

(5) if she will seek the permission of the former President of the Board of Trade, the Right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), to consult the inspector's report into the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing; [49547]

(6) if she will pass the report of her Department's 1994 investigation into the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealings on to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a request for an opinion whether *(a)* the report and *(b)* facts disclosed subsequently constitute sufficient reason for the inquiry to be re-opened; [48249]

(7) pursuant to her answer of 17 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *242*, if she will assess *(a)* the statement by Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in the Evening Standard of 9 June concerning Sir Nicholas Lloyd and *(b)* subsequent statements by Sir Nicholas Lloyd as possible new evidence which could justify the appointment of inspectors to investigate the alleged insider dealing in Anglia shares in 1994. [48253]

Mrs. Beckett: The investigations into dealings in the shares of Anglia Television Group plc were matters which were begun and completed under the previous Administration.

Reports on allegations of insider dealings are never published, as there are strict legal restraints on disclosure of information obtained in such investigations.

I would consider opening a further investigation only if substantial fresh information became available, and if it was considered to be in the public interest to do so.

In accordance with normal practice of neither confirming nor denying the existence of insider dealing investigations (unless there was some overriding public interest in doing so) no announcement was initially made of the appointment of inspectors on 8 February 1994 to inquire into dealings in the shares of Anglia Television Group Plc between 10 and 21 January 1994.

On 7 July 1994, however, it became apparent that the media had detailed knowledge of the inspection, and the then Secretary of State accordingly decided that acknowledgement was in the public interest and confirmed that an investigation was being undertaken into the dealings in Anglia shares and that Lord Archer was one of the persons concerned. The inspectors reported on 19 July 1994, having conducted formal interviews with 22 witnesses. The then Secretary of State's decision to take no further action was announced on 28 July 1994.

The original investigation had attracted widespread media coverage and speculation continued in the press and a number of further allegations were received in the Department about other dealings in Anglia shares. On reviewing this information in the spring of 1995 the then Secretary of State concluded that the inspectors should be re-appointed to investigate this new information. The then Secretary of State also decided, in line with normal practice, that this re-appointment should not be announced and that no further public statement should be made. The inspectors were re-appointed on 4 May 1995 to inquire into dealings in the shares of Anglia between 20 December 1993 and 21 January 1994. On 26 July 1996 the inspectors submitted their report on the second investigation, having conducted formal interviews with 32 witnesses. They concluded that there was no evidence on which a prosecution could be founded.

Although the second investigation was a matter of some discussion and speculation in the media at the time, the re-appointment of inspectors has not previously been publicly acknowledged; and answers to recent parliamentary questions refer only to the first investigation. However, in order that there should be no misconception on this matter, I now consider it right to confirm the re-appointment of the inspectors in 1995.

No papers relating to these two reports from the previous administration, and neither of the reports themselves have been seen by present Ministers. However, my officials have considered whether recent information constitutes new evidence which I ought to consider with a view to deciding whether to re-open the investigation. They have advised me that it does not, and I have accepted that advice; I have similarly accepted their advice that no useful purpose would be served by referring this case to Counsel or to the DPP.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) if it is standard practice for her Department's inspectors investigating alleged insider trading to ask the subject of the investigation what factors persuaded him or her to enter the market and buy shares; and if there is a verbatim record; [48251]

(2) if she will make it her policy for interviews carried out by her Department's inspectors into allegations of insider trading to be *(a)* tape-recorded and *(b)* video-recorded; [48250]

(3) on which dates, and for what period of time, her Department's inspectors investigating the conduct of Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in respect of share dealing interviewed him. [48131]

Mrs. Beckett: Inspectors appointed under S.177 of the Financial Services Act 1986 are independent of the Department and masters of their own procedure. It is for the inspectors to determine the manner in which they conduct the inquiries.

Nuclear Material

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many aircraft were involved in the transport of nuclear material from Georgia to Scotland; at what time aircraft departed Georgia and arrived in Scotland; what was the cost of *(a)* transporting and *(b)* storing the material; and if she will indicate the section of her departmental budget from which expenditures incurred on this arrangement will be drawn. [48834]

Mr. Battle: As the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), explained in an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) on 24 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *721*, one American military transport aircraft, a Galaxy C5, was used to fly all the nuclear material in the Georgian consignment to Kinloss.

The American authorities who were responsible for the details of the transportation of the nuclear material from Georgia, informed the relevant United Kingdom authorities that the time of departure of this aircraft from

Tbilisi airport was 1404 GMT on 23 April. It arrived at Kinloss at 0206 GMT on 24 April, after following a route along the Mediterranean Sea and over part of the Atlantic Ocean. It was refuelled twice in mid-air. A second American Galaxy C5, containing specialised handling equipment to assist with unloading the containers at the Dounreay site, left Tbilisi at 0800 GMT on 25 April and arrived at Kinloss at 1547 GMT the same day. This flight was shorter because it was across mainland Europe.

Transportation costs to Kinloss were borne by the American Government. The cost of transporting the nuclear material and the associated handling equipment from Kinloss to Dounreay was £40,000. The UKAEA have estimated the storage costs as approximately £5,000 per annum. These costs will be charged under the DTI budget heading Class V Vote 1 Section A6 'Energy: Nuclear and Non-Nuclear' (b) UKAEA Grant-in-Aid.

Firearms

Dr. Tonge: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to her answer of 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *103*, what discussions her Department has had with the Department for International Development concerning the illegal manufacture of, and trafficking in, firearms. [48926]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 3 July 1998]:* None. The Department of Trade and Industry contributes to the work of the G8 Lyons firearms sub-group, but is not in the lead. The Home Office is responsible for co-ordinating the interests of the many departments involved. I understand that the Department for International Development has not been involved in the discussions relating to the G8 Lyons firearms sub-group, which focuses on control and enforcement measures such as working on the establishment in law of relevant offences relating to the illegal manufacture of firearms, the licensing regimes for imports and exports, and practical co-operation between enforcement agencies.

I understand that the Department for International Development is supporting a number of initiatives that help countries and regions deal with the problem of illicit trafficking. Earlier this year funds were provided to host a seminar in South Africa which brought together experts from Europe and Southern Africa, and drew up an action plan for tackling arms proliferation in the region. Funds have also been pledged in support of the moratorium on the import, export, and manufacture of small arms for West Africa proposed by Mali.

Billiton Plc

Dr. Tonge: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has made to Billiton plc regarding the social and environmental implications of their proposed Eastern Cape Zinc Refinery Project in South Africa. [49425]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* None. Environmental issues as they affect this project are primarily a matter for the South African authorities. However, my officials have been in touch with Billiton plc and understand that the firm has completed a full environmental impact assessment of the project in consultation with local groups and public authorities, in accordance with South Africa's strict environmental controls. As regards the social implications, the project is to be financed largely by private capital and will create jobs and introduce new technology into one of South Africa's poorest provinces.

Export Credits

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the total amount received in debt service by the Export Credits Guarantee Department in 1997 from heavily indebted poor countries. [48991]

Mrs. Beckett: Payments to ECGD during the financial year 1997/98 by Heavily Indebted Poor Countries amounted to £32,860,000.

The breakdown by country, to the nearest £1000, was:

Benin: £188,000
Bolivia: £1,175,000
Burkina Faso: £58,000
Cameroon: £1,696,000
Congo: £221,000
Cote d'Ivoire: £112,000
Ethopia: £441,000
Ghana: £1,504,000
Guinea: £169,000
Guyana: £5,079,000
Kenya: £7,959,000
Madagascar: £374,000
Mali: £275,000
Mozambique: £963,000
Mauritania: £609,000
Nicaragua: £113,000
Niger: £49,000
Senegal: £60,000
Togo: £517,000
Tanzania: £3,997,000
Uganda: £773,000
Vietnam: £406,000
Yemen: £4,282,000
Zambia: £1,841,000

Coalfield Communities

Mr. Barnes: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list each *(a)* Government and *(b)* European Union initiative pertaining to the regeneration of coalfield communities, giving in each case and where appropriate the amount of money received in each of the last 10 years. [50207]

Mr. Battle: There are a number of programmes which my Department is responsible for which contribute to the regeneration of coalfield areas. In terms of Government initiatives, DTI offers grants in coalfield closure areas in the form of Regional Selective Assistance and Regional Investment Grants. The DTI also arranged for the transfer of coalfield sites to English Partnerships as part of a coalfield regeneration programme. In relation to European Union initiatives, DTI holds responsibility for European funding under the RECHAR programme.

Where coalfields are located in assisted areas, Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) is available for investment projects which create or safeguard jobs. The table provides details of RSA expenditure by DTI in local authority districts in England which contain coal closure areas.

Regional selective assistance expenditure in local authority districts in England which contain coal closure areas[1]

Financial year	*(£000)*
1988–89	1,660
1989–90	3,368
1990–91	3,464
1991–92	2,602
1992–93	3,032
1993–94	2,731
1994–95	4,838
1995–96	6,868
1996–97	9,567
1997–98	9,482
Total	47,612

[1] The following local authority districts contain coal closure areas (as defined by the Government in 1993): Ashfield, Bassetlaw, Bolsover, Broxtowe, Cannock Chase, Chesterfield, Derby, Gedlings, Lichfield, Mansfield, North Norfolk, North East Derbyshire, Newark, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Nottingham, Rotherham, Rushcliffe, South Staffordshire, Sheffield, Stafford, Staffordshire Moorlands, Stoke on Trent and Wakefield

Regional Investment Grants (RIG) are available for investment projects undertaken by small businesses. Since April 1997 these have been available only in coal closure areas lying outside the assisted areas. The table provides details of DTI expenditure on RIG in all coal closure areas.

Regional investment grant expenditure in local authority districts in England which contain coal closure areas

Financial year	*(£000)*
1988–89	87
1989–90	779
1990–91	1,264
1991–92	826
1992–93	752
1993–94	718
1994–95	982
1995–96	1,381
1996–97	1,112
1997–98	921
Total	8,822

The English Partnerships Coalfield Portfolio is as follows. In 1996, DTI arranged the transfer to English Partnerships of 56 former coalfield sites (five in the North West, twenty-four in Yorkshire, eighteen in the Midlands and nine in the North East). English Partnerships are taking forward a 10 year programme to reclaim these sites, working together with Coalfield Community groups, private developers and local authorities to improve the environment and create opportunities in these areas for the creation of jobs.

Rechar is a European Community Initiative funded from the European Structural Funds. Its aim is to support the economic conversion and regeneration of the coal mining areas of the European Community hardest hit by the decline of the coal industry. There have been two Rechar initiatives during the last ten years, covering the periods 1992–93 and 1994–99.

There were eleven individual Rechar I programmes for the 1992–93 period for the following areas: TAWSEN (North East), Durham and Cleveland, South Yorkshire, Mid Yorkshire, Lancashire, South Staffordshire, North Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire and North Derby, Western Scotland, Eastern Scotland, and South Wales.

There are eight individual Rechar II programmes for the current 1994–99 period: Eastern Scotland, Western Scotland, North East, North West, East Midlands, West Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and South Wales.

Under these programmes, the following Structural Funds have been paid (cumulative totals):

Rechar I 1992–93

Date (as at end month)	*Paid out (£000—cumulative totals)*
December 1992	603
December 1993	25,945
December 1994[1]	69,706
December 1995[1]	90,296

[1] For European Regional Development Fund projects, commitments for payments can be made up to the end of the programme i.e. 31 December 1993. However, claims for payment for those commitments can continue to be made for a further 2 years i.e. until 31 December 1995

Rechar II 1994–99

Date (as at end of month)	*Paid out (£000)*
December 1996	1,621
March 1997	11,047
March 1998	25,140

Tissue Manufacturers

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the total amount of aid from Government and Government agencies given to each of the tissue enterprises *(a)* Proctor and Gamble, Trafford Park, *(b)* A and M Paper, Skelmersdale, and *(c)* Kimberley Clark, Barrow-in-Furness, in the past year. [50357]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* Neither A and M Paper, Skelmersdale, nor Kimberley Clark, Barrow-in-Furness, has received any aid from Government and Government Agencies in the past year. Proctor and Gamble, Trafford Park, has been offered a DTI grant but the amount is still Commercial in Confidence. English Partnerships could also provide up to £3 million, and Manchester TEC up to £1 million in assistance if specific criteria are met.

HEALTH

Community Hospitals

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many community hospitals have closed in each of the last five years. [32543]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, the Community Hospitals Association estimates that 35 community hospitals in England were closed between 1985 and 1997.

Community hospitals in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are a matter for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales, for Scotland and for Northern Ireland.

Public Appointments

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many persons who applied to serve as non-executive directors or as chairpersons to NHS trusts in North East England, excluding Yorkshire, were *(a)* unsuccessful and *(b)* not appointed to any position; how many of the unsuccessful candidates were (i) female, (ii) from ethnic minorities or (iii) worked in health professions or occupations. [43820]

Mr. Milburn: A total of 350 applicants were considered for 51 non-executive director vacancies on National Health Service trust boards in the northern part of the Northern and Yorkshire Region during the autumn 1997 round of appointments, including appointments to merged trusts in April 1998. The applicants had all been interviewed by independent panels: of the 299 who were unsuccessful in obtaining an appointment, 81 are female, 7 belong to an ethnic minority and 34 worked in health professions or occupations at the time of their application.

The information requested for applicants who did not proceed beyond the initial interview stage could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Hospital Doctors (Working Hours)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he proposes to reduce the working hours of hospital doctors; and if he will make a statement. [43689]

Mr. Milburn: Action to reduce junior doctors' hours continues to make progress. The figures for March 1998 show that reported compliance with the target of a maximum average of 56 hours a week now stands at 83.3 per cent. of all junior doctors. Regional task forces will continue to work closely with trusts to tackle the remaining problem posts, which now number 4,999, or one in six of all doctors in training.

Rothbury Community Hospital

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects tenders to be invited for the new Rothbury Community Hospital. [47819]

Mr. Milburn: The new community hospital at Rothbury is part of Phase II of the redevelopment of Wansbeck General Hospital for which tenders were invited on 29 May 1996, with receipt of applications by 28 June 1996.

Pharmaceutical Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the contribution of the United Kingdom-based pharmaceutical industry to the United Kingdom economy. [47803]

Mr. Milburn: The pharmaceuticals industry is a significant contributor to the United Kingdom balance of trade. In 1997, the industry accounted for a £2,292 million trade surplus from £5,484 million in exports. This was a 1.9 per cent. increase over the 1996 surplus. The industry also accounts for some 75,000 UK jobs.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assistance is given to the pharmaceutical industry for research and development on new drugs. [47818]

Mr. Milburn: The principal form of assistance is through the prices of medicines bought by the National Health Service. The pharmaceutical price regulation scheme, which controls the profits and indirectly the prices of pharmaceutical companies from the sale of medicines to the NHS, makes allowances available for research and development to encourage the development of new medicines. This support amounted to £556 million for 1994, up from £539 million for 1993.

Spinal Injuries Units

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many additional beds will be provided in specialist spinal injuries units in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [48063]

Mr. Milburn: The information is not available in the form requested.

Urban Ambulance Service

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when will he publish the emergency ambulance performance statistics for the urban ambulance service 1997–98. [48132]

Mr. Milburn: Details of the performance of ambulance services was published on 26 June 1998 in the Statistical Bulletin "Ambulance Services, England: 1997–98", copies of which are available in the Library.

Hospital Appointments

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to NHS trusts with regard to the removal of patients from waiting lists for failure to attend; what change this represents over the policy prior to 1 May 1997; and what estimate he has made of the number of patients removed from waiting lists since 1 May 1997 as a result of such changes in guidance. [49108]

Mr. Milburn: The waiting list action team has reiterated existing guidance on validating waiting lists. There has been no new guidance or change in policy on the removal of patients from National Health Service waiting lists since 1 May 1997.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospital appointments were missed *(a)* at North Tyneside General Hospital and *(b)* nationally during 1997; and at what estimated cost. [49336]

Mr. Milburn: Figures for non-attendance in hospital outpatients clinics at the North Tyneside Healthcare National Health Service Trust and for England for

1996/97 are in the table. Information on the cost of non-attendance is not available, but the average cost of a hospital outpatient attendance is £61.

Non-attendances at consultant outpatient clinics in North Tyneside Healthcare NHS Trust and England, 1996–97, number and percentage

Attendances	*North Tyneside Healthcare NHS Trust*	*England*
First		
Number seen (000s)	29.3	11,298.3
Number that did not attend (000s)	3.2	1,347.6
Per cent. that did not attend	9.9	10.7
Subsequent		
Number seen (000s)	63.7	29,565.6
Number that did not attend (000s)	9.4	4,160.2
Per cent. that did not attend	12.8	12.3
Total		
Number seen (000s)	93.1	40,864.0
Number that did not attend (000s)	12.6	5,507.8
Per cent. that did not attend	11.9	11.9

Source:
DH publication, Outpatients and ward attenders for England, 1996–97

Hospital Waiting Lists

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his oral answer of 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 143–45, on hospital waiting lists, if he will publish the interim figures received by his Department which indicated that NHS waiting lists in England were falling. [49109]

Mr. Milburn: Early indications suggest that waiting lists began to come down in June. Validated figures will be published in due course.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of trends in hospital waiting lists between the first and second quarters of 1998; and if he will make a statement. [50476]

Mr. Milburn: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said on 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 143–44, early indications from the National Health Service Executive show that waiting lists stopped rising in May and have been coming down in June. We expect this downward trend to continue so that, by next April, the NHS will have delivered a record reduction in waiting lists to below the 1.16 million inherited from the previous administration.

GP Appointments

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GP appointments were missed *(a)* in the Newcastle and North Tyneside Health Authority Area and *(b)* nationally during 1997; and at what estimated cost. [49335]

Mr. Milburn: Data on general practitioner appointments are not collected.

In December 1997, the Department provided funding of £1 million to the Doctor Patient Partnership (DPP) which is a campaign run by the British Medical Association to encourage patients to make more appropriate use of primary care services. The DPP sponsors various national campaigns to encourage patients to think about their responsibilities as well as their rights. One of the campaigns it has run this year was entitled "Keep it or cancel it!". It focused on appointment-keeping and was targeted at those patients who fail to keep appointments.

Dementia

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will allow GPs to issue private prescriptions for Aricept (donepezil) and Exelon (rivastigmine) anti-dementia drugs for their NHS patients; [49242]

(2) what central funding is available to regional health authorities to provide for Aricept (donepezil) and Exelon (rivastigmine) anti-dementia treatment. [49243]

Mr. Milburn: Aricept and Exelon are both available on the National Health Service, and any general practitioner prescribing them to patients on their NHS list should do so in accordance with GPs' terms of service. Guidance from the Standing Medical Advisory Committee on the use of Aricept for Alzheimer's disease was issued to the NHS on 30 April.

The potential cost arising from the introduction of significant new treatments, including drugs, is taken into account when health authority funding allocations are determined. Thereafter, costs of prescribing all drugs are expected to be met from within these allocations, taking account of local priorities.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support his Department gives to those caring for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. [50230]

Ms Jowell: We value the role of carers, who are fundamental to community and health care, and recognise their valuable contribution to society, which is sometimes made at considerable personal cost. That is why, on 10 June 1998, my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister announced the national strategy for carers. This is a Government-wide review which will examine how carers can best be helped and supported.

The Department issued a Health of the Nation Handbook last year on the mental health of older people which emphasised the importance of carers in the provision of care for older people with mental health problems. The Alzheimer's Disease Society is the main voluntary organisation which supports carers of those suffering from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. The Department enjoys a close working relationship with the society and supports two projects, through funding from its section 64 scheme, aimed at promoting quality dementia care and developing a network of dementia services development centres.

NHS Trusts (Demography)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those health trusts with populations in excess of 550,000, indicating the size of population, the numbers of staff employed and their current budget. [49333]

Mr. Milburn: The information is not available in the form requested.

Dental Services (North Staffordshire)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the proposed dedicated vocational training scheme for dentistry in North Staffordshire. [49339]

Mr. Milburn: The Department currently funds four vocational training schemes in the West Midlands region, one in Stafford. There are no plans to fund another scheme in Staffordshire in the current financial year.

Private Treatment (Invoicing)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average time which elapses between private treatment and tests being carried out in the NHS and the issuing of invoices in respect of such treatment. [49479]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Health Screening

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the advantages of extending the range of areas covered by health screening for those aged over 60 years. [50108]

Mr. Milburn: The National Screening Committee considers the effectiveness and feasibility of individual screening programmes in advising Ministers about their introduction or modification. The age-range of the target population is an integral part of the assessment.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the timescale by which health districts in the North West of England will have *(a)* recruited sufficient specialist staff and *(b)* procured the necessary equipment to meet the four week guidelines for radiotherapy treatment for urgent breast cancer referrals; what measures he is taking to recruit staff and procure equipment; and at what estimated cost. [50243]

Ms Jowell: In order fully to assess the current level of radiotherapy service provision in the North West and to ensure that deficiencies in access to radiotherapy services for all patients in the North West can be identified and addressed, the National Health Service Executive North West Region is undertaking, as a matter of urgency, a detailed analysis of the level of service currently being provided and a projection of the level of service required, which will include staffing levels, equipment requirement and costs. This work is expected to be completed in the autumn.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the health districts in the North West of England where breast cancer urgent referrals cannot routinely be provided with radiotherapy treatment within the four week guideline. [50242]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, reports produced by the Royal College of Radiologists on 8 July 1998 and taken from an audit of hospital waiting times conducted during a week in February 1998 indicated that, in the North West Region, of those women requiring post operative radiotherapy, 48 per cent. started treatment in 4 weeks and 85 per cent. in 6 weeks. To ensure that deficiencies in access to radiotherapy services for all patients in the North West can be identified and addressed, the National Health Service Executive North West Region is undertaking, as a matter of urgency, a detailed analysis of the level of service currently being provided and a projection of the level of service required. This work is expected to be completed by the autumn.

Organophosphates

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if in making its recommendations about the daily consumption of fruit and vegetables his Department has taken into account the risk to pregnant women, infants and children of ingesting more than the acceptable levels of organophosphate residues. [50418]

Ms Jowell: Our advice to increase fruit and vegetable consumption is based on the nutritional benefits of a diet rich in fruit and vegetables. In general, residues of organophosphates found in fruit and vegetables are low. High residues have been detected in some individual fruit and vegetables but such residues would erode safety margins rather than cause adverse health effects. We also advise that if fruit or vegetables are to be eaten raw, they should be washed and peeled if necessary, the outside leaves removed and carrots should be topped and tailed.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received calling for financial assistance for people with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C; and if he will make a statement. [50383]

Ms Jowell: Since 2 May 1997, hon. Members have asked fourteen Parliamentary Questions (in addition to this one) and we have received 275 letters about the issue of special payments for people with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C through National Health Service treatment.

Mearwood Park Hospital

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what the income from the sale of the former Mearwood Park Hospital site in Leeds was spent. [50547]

Mr. Milburn: The income received to date from the sale of Meanwood Park has been used by the Leeds Community and Mental Health National Health Service Trust to strengthen its financial situation and facilitate the closure and reprovision of High Royds Hospital in 2001.

None of the sale proceeds have been used outside the Leeds Community and Mental Health National Health Service Trust.

Health Care Services (Tamworth)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures the NHS has introduced to improve the provision of healthcare services in Tamworth since 1 May 1997. [50644]

Mr. Milburn: Healthcare services in South Staffordshire have benefited from significant extra resources since May 1997, including £1.7 million towards the cost of winter pressures and £3 million to fund waiting list initiatives. Premier Health National Health Service Trust has received a £178,000 share of the waiting list moneys, and aims to treat an extra 900 patients from Tamworth and the surrounding areas. Good Hope Hospital NHS Trust in Birmingham will receive £357,000 to treat an extra 500 South Staffordshire patients.

In addition to this, local people have benefited from the development of the Sir Robert Peel Hospital in Tamworth, improving the availability of community health services and out-patient facilities to the local population.

Bogus Charity Collectors

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will warn hospital managements about bogus charity collectors who apply for permission to collect on hospital premises and in NHS grounds. [50321]

Mr. Michael: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given him today, *Official Report*, column *192*.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the current energy consumption of his Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what proposals he has to include energy efficiency performance figures in his Department's annual report. [50641]

Dr. Howells: The current energy consumption of the Department is approximately 2.6 million kWh per month.

We are currently developing new performance indicators to enable comparison with external independent standards of good practice.

Some energy efficiency performance figures are already included in the Department's annual report. We plan to extend information on our environmental performance to reflect more detailed monitoring, and will require agencies and NDPBs to report on their performance.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of his Department's waste is recycled; and what future targets he has set. [50642]

Dr. Howells: Approximately 28 per cent. of the Department's waste is recycled at present. Targets to reduce or recycle waste beyond this year are currently being reviewed as part of our overall improvement programme.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to discourage car use by his Department's employees. [50643]

Dr. Howells: The Department intends to reduce reliance on the car by encouraging people to use more environmentally friendly means of travelling to work. It is intended that the Department's Green Transport Plan will include proposals for drawing up Commuting Action Plans for each major Departmental site.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to raise awareness of environmental issues within his Department; and what specific training will be made available to staff. [50639]

Dr. Howells: We have taken a number of measures to raise awareness of environmental issues in DfEE with respect to both policy development and Greening the Department. All Divisional Managers, Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) sponsor teams and the Employment Service have received copies of the guidance on policy appraisal and the environment. Recipients have been asked to carry out screening of all policies and programmes at an early stage of development and to undertake full environmental appraisals where appropriate. The sustainable development strategy consultation document "Opportunities for Change" has been distributed to DfEE teams which have a particular interest in environmental issues and the team have been asked to bring the document to the attention of their contacts outside the Department.

Two training videos produced by the Employment Service, will be promoted throughout the Department later in the year as part of a wider awareness campaign to raise the profile of energy efficiency and environmental issues in the workplace. Each major Departmental site will establish action groups to promote environmental awareness among staff.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what activities relating to his environmental responsibilities his Green Minister has undertaken since being appointed. [50640]

Dr. Howells: I regularly meet and hold discussions with organisations which have environmental interests and with other Green Ministers.

FE Colleges (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list Worcestershire's further education colleges, indicating their operating surpluses or deficits, for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97 and *(f)* 1997–98. [49473]

Dr. Howells: The table lists the further education colleges in Worcestershire and their operating surpluses or deficits for the four academic years from 1993–94 to 1996–97. Figures for 1992–93 and 1997–98 are not available.

Worcestershire further education colleges with operating surpluses or deficits

College	Operating surplus/deficit £000[1]			
	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Evesham College	4	(87)	(239)	73
Kidderminster College	(127)	(174)	(288)	(274)
North East Worcestershire College	(928)	(273)	(649)	218
Pershore College of Horticulture	14	85	(204)	(10)
Worcestershire College of Agriculture[3]	(68)	(120)	(242)	(261)
Worcester College of Technology	(539)	(375)	(1,015)	(277)
Worcester Sixth Form College	178	113	238	89

[1] Figures in brackets are deficits; the others are surpluses
[2] 1993–94 covers a period of 16 months from April 1993 to July 1994
[3] Worcestershire College of Agriculture merged with Pershore College of Horticulture on 10 May 1997 to form Pershore and Hindlip College. The 1996–97 accounts for Worcester College of Agriculture are prepared to 10 May 1997

Further Education Funding

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about the impact on colleges of the derecognition of certain Schedule 2 qualifications for FEFC funding purposes; and if he will make a statement. [49317]

Dr. Howells: Representations have been received from a number of colleges and from the Association of Colleges. Approvals granted since the Schedule 2(a) list was first published have largely met the concerns expressed. A number of awarding bodies have applications under consideration and, where relevant criteria are satisfied, approvals will be granted in due course.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the report 'Further Education for the New Millennium', if it is his policy that there should be additional funding for students from deprived areas. [49459]

Dr. Howells: It is the Government's policy that FE funding arrangements should fairly reflect the costs of providing for disadvantaged students.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received above the FEFC's decision to limit the eligibility of Schedule 2 qualifications for the New Deal for over-25-year-olds; and if he will make a statement. [49316]

Mr. Andrew Smith: We have received representations from various individuals and organisations about the design of the New Deal full-time education and training opportunities.

Ministers in this Department and the Department of Social Security decided that under the New Deal people 25 or over, unemployed two years or more, may take employment-related courses covered by Schedule 2 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (or Section 6 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992) and retain their Jobseeker's Allowance. They may also in particular cases take higher level courses, where these are likely to lead to an early prospect of employment and alternative sources of funding are not available.

Pupil Languages

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will rank local education authorities in England according to *(a)* the number of languages spoken by children attending maintained schools and *(b)* the average number of languages per school spoken by children attending maintained schools, indicating the number of languages in each case. [49442]

Mr. Byers: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Free School Meals (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of primary school children in Gloucestershire, by district, are eligible for free school meals. [49253]

Mr. Byers: Provisional figures show that 12.1 per cent. of pupils in maintained primary schools in the Gloucestershire Local Education Authority area in January 1998 were known to be eligible for free school meals.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what percentage of primary school children in Cheltenham, by school, are eligible for free school meals; [49254]

(2) what percentage of primary school children in Cheltenham, by school, were eligible for free school meals in 1987. [49255]

Mr. Byers: Information on school meals for individual schools is not published centrally.

Government Policies

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the projects undertaken by his Department since 1 May 1997 to research public reaction to *(a)* Government policies and *(b)* potential new policies; and if he will place the results of the research in the Library. [46676]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* In line with the practice of successive Administrations, my department routinely consults the public, interested parties and client groups by way of consultation papers, White Papers and more recently using the Cabinet Office

People's Panel, on a wide range of policies and proposed legislation. I have therefore confined my reply to major exercises:

Excellence in Schools White Paper consultation (July-October 1997)

Excellence for All Children Green Paper consultation on Special Educational Needs (October 1997-January 1998)

The Learning Age Green Paper consultation (March-July 1998: results to be published in Autumn 1998).

It is our normal practice to make the results of such research available to the public, including placing copies in the Library.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Set-aside Land

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what were the total payments for land set aside in England in 1997. [50138]

Mr. Rooker: Total payments of £79 million have been made under the Arable Area Payments Scheme for land set aside in England in 1997.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what activities his Green Minister has undertaken and what he has achieved as regards sustainability within the Department since being appointed. [50415]

Mr. Rooker: As Green Minister, I meet regularly with colleagues within the Department to discuss its policies.

I appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee on 31 March to report on the Department's actions on greening Government and sustainability in general.

I have also attended two meetings of Green Ministers which have considered the future role of Green Ministers, the consultation papers on the review of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, green operations and revised guidance on the environmental appraisal of policies.

I met my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to discuss the Department's programme for ensuring the further integration of sustainable development into policies and the greening of operations. The Department has circulated guidance on carrying out environmental appraisal of policies, and published a consultation paper on the development of a set of indicators for sustainable agriculture in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to raise awareness of environmental and sustainability issues within his Department; and if specific training will be made available to staff. [50413]

Mr. Rooker: Awareness of environmental and sustainability issues is already recognised as important to the work of the Department and is integral to its training and development programme.

Drift Nets

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the likely impact of the planned tuna drift net ban on the livelihoods of United Kingdom fishermen. [50409]

Mr. Morley: In 1997 the value of tuna caught by the five UK vessels participating in the tuna drift net fishery was some £49,000. This represented part of a continuing downward trend.

The decision to end the fishery in December 2001 permits a gradual phasing out so minimising costs to industry, particularly gear maintenance and replacement costs. The fishermen concerned are able to continue fishing for tuna using fishing gear other than drift nets.

Animal Health Act

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to amend the arrangements his Department has for applying sections 40 to 49 of the Animal Health Act 1981 and any subordinate legislation made under the same sections of the Act; and if he will make a statement. [50048]

Mr. Morley: I have no current plans to amend the arrangements for applying sections 40 to 49 of the Animal Health Act 1981.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of recent proposals on the further reform of the Common Fisheries Policy by Spain's fishing minister. [50543]

Mr. Morley: I have not seen any recent proposals on the further reform of the Common Fisheries Policy by Spain's fishing Minister. However, the British Embassy in Madrid has requested a copy of recent proposals put forward by parts of the Spanish fishing industry.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on *(a)* the last meeting of the EU Fishing Ministers and *(b)* the prospects for their agreement over the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. [50544]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend made a statement concerning the outcome of the last meeting of the EU Fisheries Council in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *658–59*.

I expect the Council to reach agreement on the future of the Common Fisheries Policy before the deadline of 31 December 2002.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Illegal Weapons and Explosives

7. **Mr. Home Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the detection and interception of illegal weapons and explosives by the police and security forces in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. [49024]

Mr. Ingram: The detection and interception of illegal weapons and explosives by the security forces are of prime importance in the fight against terrorist and criminal organisations. The RUC, supported by the Army, work tirelessly to recover terrorist weaponry and to avert those in possession of them, evidenced by the number of firearms and explosives finds reported by the Chief Constable in appendix 5 table 3 of his Annual Report, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. In doing so the RUC maintain a close liaison with their counterparts, the Garda Siochana who have an excellent record in combating terrorism; indeed, so far this year they have found in the region of 5,500 lbs of Home Made Explosives. Co-operation between the RUC and the Garda Siochana is excellent.

New Deal

8. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on progress in implementing the new deal in Northern Ireland. [49025]

Mr. Worthington: Progress has been very encouraging and compares favourably to the position in Great Britain. Almost 800 employers have signed New Deal agreements. Around 2,500 young people have entered Gateway and will progress to the available options.

The Chancellor's recent initiative will enable us to provide extensive New Deal opportunities to the over 25s from November.

29. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in implementing the new deal in Northern Ireland. [49047]

Mr. Worthington: The New Deal for 18–24 year olds was launched on 6 April and the Government are encouraged by progress with over 700 employer agreements signed. We think this is the highest number of firms pro rata in the UK. We received applications from 84 consortiums to run the education, environment and voluntary organisation options. 26 consortiums have been chosen. Some 2,200 young people have entered the Gateway and will progress to the four available options.

The Chancellor's recent initiative means that additional New Deal provision for the 25+ age group will be available from November of this year.

Human Rights Commission

9. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made towards the establishment of a human rights commission in Northern Ireland. [49026]

27. **Mrs. Fiona Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made towards the establishment of a human rights commission in Northern Ireland. [49045]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Northern Ireland Bill, which will contain provisions to establish a Human Rights Commission, will be introduced in the House later today.

Social Security Agency

10. **Mr. Forsythe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many staff left the Social Security Agency during the 1997–98 financial year. [49027]

Mr. Worthington: A total of 144 permanent staff left the Social Security Agency during the 1997–98 year.

Security Situation

11. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the security situation. [49028]

Mr. Ingram: The stand-off at Drumcree church led to violence in many Loyalist areas in Northern Ireland. In the most serious incident on Sunday morning, 12 July, three young boys, Jason, Richard and Mark Quinn, died when their home in Ballymoney was attacked by petrol bombers. The RUC, supported by the Army, despite coming under sustained attack from gunfire, blast and petrol bombs have ensured that life continues normally for the majority of people, as well as continuing to guard against further attacks by dissident republican groups.

Peace Process

12. **Mr. Wareing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on recent developments in respect of the peace process in Northern Ireland. [49029]

21. **Mr. White:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the peace process following the election of the assembly. [49039]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer my hon Friend to the oral answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) today, *Official Report*, column 395.

18. **Mr. Colvin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on international involvement in the peace process in Northern Ireland. [49035]

Marjorie Mowlam: Apart from the valuable contribution of the team of international chairmen which is well recognised, there was no direct international involvement in the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement. However, the Government are grateful for the international support we have received from the United States, the European Union and many others for our efforts and those of the Irish Government, and all the parties engaged in the Talks to help bring about a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

We are also grateful for the financial contribution by the European Union and by those countries which contribute to the International Fund for Ireland.

24. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what further steps she intends to take to promote the peace process. [49042]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government will promote work speedily with the Irish Government and the New Northern Ireland Assembly to make arrangements for the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement which provides the best chance for lasting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Water Industry

13. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the future regulation of the water industry in Northern Ireland. [49030]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government plan shortly to publish a consultation paper on the future structural, funding and regulatory arrangements for delivery of water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. The paper is intended to stimulate a very significant debate about the provision of these services in Northern Ireland on which final decisions will be taken by the new local administration.

School Accommodation

14. **Mr. Beggs:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the estimated cost and time scale in which substandard school accommodation will be upgraded. [49031]

Mr. Worthington: There are 130 major building projects in the top three priority categories of the schools planning list with an estimated capital value of some £550m, and the current backlog of maintenance in schools is estimated at £80m. No timescale can be put on the work programme required to meet these needs—this will be governed by the availability of resources.

Nursery Education

15. **Mr. Stott:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the availability of nursery education in Northern Ireland. [49032]

19. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the availability of nursery education in Northern Ireland. [49037]

22. **Mr. Chisholm:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the availability of nursery education in Northern Ireland. [49040]

Mr. Worthington: Pre-School Education Development Plans for each Education and Library Board area have been approved, through which 2,200 additional pre-school education places will be funded in Northern Ireland from the 1998–99 school year. This represents an increase of 20 per cent. in funded pre-school provision and will make places available for almost 60 per cent. of children in their immediate pre-school year.

Electricity Charges

16. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how the price of electricity in Northern Ireland compares to that in the rest of the United Kingdom; and what policies Her Majesty's Government are pursuing to reduce electricity prices in Northern Ireland. [49033]

Mr. Ingram: Electricity bills for domestic and small commercial and industrial customers are, on average, around 20 per cent. higher in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. The primary aim of both Government and wider European policy is to achieve lower electricity prices through the introduction of greater competition into the local energy market. Following the restructuring of the industry, responsibility for ensuring that prices paid by consumers reflect the costs of production and distribution rests with the independent Director General of Electricity Supply for Northern Ireland.

Bloomfield Report

17. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken in response to the Bloomfield report on the victims of violence in Northern Ireland. [49034]

Mr. Ingram: I announced on 30 June a number of initiatives, representing an expenditure of almost £1 million, as a first response to Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report. I have also launched a consultation exercise which will help to identify and prioritise a package of measures for victims, and inform the future allocation of funding.

Guardsmen Fisher and Wright

20. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received on the case of Guardsmen Fisher and Wright in relation to the timing of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. [49038]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received a number of representations about these cases. The Secretary of State formerly had a statutory power to refer a case to the Court of Appeal again if it seemed that the conviction had been the result of a miscarriage of justice. However, this power lapsed when the Criminal Cases Review Commission began work after March 1997. The Commission alone now has the statutory power to refer a case back to the court. My right hon. Friend did not retain any residual powers and the Commission is not responsible to her for its investigation of individual cases. In these circumstances, therefore, it is for the Commission to determine the priority which is assigned to specific cases.

Parades Commission

23. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the work of the Parades Commission. [49041]

Mr. Ingram: The Government are satisfied that the Parades Commission have approached their task in an even-handed and impartial manner. We support the work of the Commission, in particular acknowledging the difficult decisions they have to make, and we would urge everyone in Northern Ireland to give them similar backing.

National Health Service

25. **Mr. Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she expects NHS waiting lists in Northern Ireland to fall to the level of 1 May 1997. [49043]

Mr. Worthington: I am pleased to say that the waiting lists for hospital inpatient treatment in Northern Ireland have already fallen below the level of 1 May 1997. At that date there were about 46,000 waiting for treatment

compared with just over 45,500 at the end of March 1998. The Government remain committed to reducing the lists in Northern Ireland to 39,000 by 31 March 1999.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the spending priorities for the NHS in Northern Ireland. [49018]

Mr. Worthington: We will be spending over £1.7 billion on health and social services in Northern Ireland this year. Our priorities include £13 million to reduce waiting lists; £2 million to develop cancer services, with a commitment to a new pioneering cancer centre at Belfast City hospital; £5 million for the further development of community care services; and £4 million for services for children.

Disability Living Allowance

26. **Rev. Martin Smyth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the working of the Disability Living Allowance. [49044]

Mr. Worthington: There are some difficulties associated with Disability Living Allowance which were highlighted in the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report "The Administration of Disability Living Allowance by the Social Security Agency" dated 22 January 1998. In response, the Agency has prepared a challenging Action Plan to improve quality and delivery of service on Disability Living Allowance and this is being implemented.

Beef Export Ban

28. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the likely impact on farm incomes of the ending of the beef export ban on shipments from Northern Ireland. [49046]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The raising of the ban on the export of Northern Ireland beef should result in an improvement in beef producers' incomes in the longer term. It is difficult to be precise on the size of the impact because it is unknown how quickly and to what extent old markets will be regained and new ones developed.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 July 1998

DEFENCE

Departmental Environmental Policies

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current energy consumption of his Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what plans he has to include energy efficiency performance figures in his Department's annual report. [50087]

Mr. Spellar: Annual consumption of energy figures including those for MOD are reported by Departments to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions as part of the overall Government Energy Efficiency Campaign. A summary of the information provided by Departments is in the Library of the House.

The MOD target for energy savings is the same as that for the rest of the Government Estate and reflects current Government Policy, which is that 20 per cent. savings should be achieved by 31 March 2000 when measured against 1991 consumption as the base line. MOD has to date achieved an 18.6 per cent. reduction in Energy Expenditure 1996–97 relative to 1990–91.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he has introduced to discourage car use by his Department's employees. [50085]

Mr. Spellar: The use of public transport for commuting purposes is already encouraged by the availability of interest free loans to purchase season tickets and bicycles and the provision of cycle parking facilities. Departmental Travel Regulations require the most cost effective methods of transport to be used for official business. Measures to encourage greater use of public transport for duty travel as well as commuting to and from the work place are being considered during the preparation of the department's Green Transport Plans. The plans will draw on guidance issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions last Autumn.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of his Department's waste is recycled; and what targets he has set for increasing this percentage. [50095]

Mr. Spellar: My Department is committed to the development of waste minimisation programmes which include recycling schemes. However, owing to the local nature of these schemes, statistics on recycling are not held centrally. Target setting will be considered as work is taken forward in the context of the Government's model framework for Greening Government Operations.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what activities relating to his environmental responsibilities his green Minister has undertaken since being appointed. [50086]

Mr. Spellar: Since assuming responsibility for the development and promotion of Government environmental policy in my Department, I have attended the Green Ministers' fora and had bilateral discussions with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, covering a wide range of environmental issues. I have also given both oral and written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on my Department's management of its environmental responsibilities.

I have had several meetings with other Government Department Ministers to discuss a range of historical pollution and contamination problems at home and abroad. I have met a number of environmental groups to discuss their concerns in the context of the Strategic Defence Review.

I have chaired my Department's Ministerial Steering Group on the Environment and Energy Efficiency to consider how emerging Government policy initiatives on the environment are to be taken forward in the Ministry of Defence.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to raise awareness of environmental issues within his Department; and what training will be made available to staff. [50094]

Mr. Spellar: Environmental policy matters are cascaded throughout the Department by means of a well developed environmental committee and focal point structure. Awareness of environmental issues and policy guidance is also promoted through regular updating of my Department's Environmental Manual and through internal publications such as "Sanctuary" which is devoted to conservation issues on the defence estate. In the case of energy use, an energy warden scheme has been put in place to provide information and practical advice on energy savings measures to departmental consumers. In addition, a programme of environmental protection training courses open to both Service and civilian personnel has been established. The purpose of the programme is both to raise awareness of environmental issues and to provide staff with the necessary competence to ensure compliance with environmental regulation.

RAF Newton

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are his Department's future plans for the use of the site of RAF Newton in Nottinghamshire following the completion of the Defence Review. [50614]

Mr. Spellar: There are no current plans to change the use of RAF Newton and it is envisaged that the units currently based at the station will remain there for the foreseeable future. Disposal plans for the surplus areas of RAF Newton will be finalised as part of the detailed follow-up work to the Strategic Defence Review.

Trident

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his oral statement of 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 1076, if the figure of 48 nuclear warheads to be deployed on each Trident submarine is a minimum figure. [50617]

Mr. George Robertson: The figure of 48 is the exact number of warheads that we plan to deploy on our Trident submarines.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been *(a)* the maximum and *(b)* the average number of nuclear warheads deployed on each Trident submarine since HMS 'Vanguard' entered service. [50618]

Mr. George Robertson: Trident submarines have typically deployed on deterrent patrol with 60 warheads.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to remove Trident nuclear warheads from Coulport for dismantling in order to implement the Strategic Defence Review; and what proportion of warheads are to be removed; [50565]

(2) what plans he has to reduce the number of Trident nuclear warheads currently deployed on Vanguard class submarines in order to implement the Strategic Defence Review; and what proportion of warheads are to be removed. [50566]

Mr. George Robertson: 12 warheads are to be removed from each of the three Trident submarines currently in service during their next programmed docking in the warhead fitting facility at Coulport. This process will be completed before the end of the year. Production of warheads to meet previous plans had not been completed and we do not need to decommission any warheads to implement Strategic Defence Review changes. Adjustments are being made to future warhead production, refurbishment and decommissioning plans to maintain an operationally available stockpile of fewer than 200 warheads.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the fourth Trident submarine, Vengeance, is scheduled to carry out contractors' sea trials in Scotland. [50567]

Mr. George Robertson: Contractors' sea trials are scheduled to take place early next year.

Territorial Army

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* each TA and cadet centre in the UK, *(b)* the TA and cadet units based in each centre and *(c)* the other military and non-military organisations which use each centre. [50555]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* I will write to the hon. Member with a list of TA and Cadet centres, and the units that are based in each. A copy of my letter will be placed in the Library. However, we do not hold centrally records of other military and non-military users of such centres and so the information in part *(c)* of the hon. Gentleman's question could therefore be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Staff College, Camberley

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which organisation he proposes to re-site in the Staff College buildings at Camberley; and if he will make a statement. [50838]

Dr. Reid: A range of options for the future of the former Staff College Buildings at Camberley are being studied. No proposals have yet been put to Ministers, and no decisions have been taken.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Rear Seat Belts

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring procedures he has put in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the current Rear Seat Belt Awareness Campaign. [50320]

Dr. Strang: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has commissioned market research both before and after the campaign to ascertain awareness and understanding of its advertising message to belt up in the back.

In addition, the biannual surveys carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory, on behalf of my Department, will continue to monitor seat belt wearing rates both in the front and rear of cars.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incidents of damage to sites of special scientific interest have occurred in each year since 1992. [50140]

Angela Eagle: Details of the number of incidents of damage to Sites of Special Scientific Interest are published in the annual reports produced by the respective country agencies, English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales, all of which are held in the Library of the House.

Such figures are not presently available for areas of special scientific interest in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance his Department *(a)* has issued and *(b)* intends to issue to the wildlife agencies responsible for monitoring and supervising sites of special scientific interest for the discharge of their duties. [50141]

Angela Eagle: The wildlife agencies have a statutory duty to notify Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

The Department issued a Code of Guidance for SSSIs in 1983. this explained the provisions contained in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for the protection of special sites, including the notification of sites. We will review the need for further guidance in England and Wales following consultation on improvements to the protection and management of SSSIs.

The financial relationship between the DETR and English Nature is governed by a financial memorandum. This has recently been reviewed and a revised text came into operation at the start of the current financial year. We will adopt a management statement describing the strategic relationship between the Department and English Nature as soon as we receive Treasury and Cabinet Office approval of the text.

English Nature adheres to the procedures set out in "Government Accounting", and is notified by the Department of changes to this guidance from time to time. English Nature is also notified of Ministerial priorities when the allocation of grant-in-aid for each financial year is announced.

These are matters for the territorial departments in relation to the wildlife agencies in Wales and Scotland.

Wildlife

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his proposed timetable for bringing forward new legislation to strengthen the protection of wildlife. [50139]

Angela Eagle: We are presently considering a number of means for improving the protection and management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. There is likely to be consultation later this year. We are also examining what further measures are needed to strengthen wildlife protection. If legislation proves necessary we will look for a suitable opportunity.

Donana Pollution Incident

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what technical assistance the UK has provided to the Spanish authorities to tackle the Donana pollution incident. [50075]

Angela Eagle: A number of UK bodies have offered assistance to the Spanish authorities in the aftermath of the Donana pollution incident. The Natural Environment Research Council Institutes and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds made a joint visit to Donana soon after the incident to assess the situation and have been able to make a number of suggestions for future monitoring. English Partnerships and the Environment Agency are also arranging to visit Donana in the near future to assess what advice and assistance they may be able to offer the Spanish authorities.

Birds of Prey (Culling Licences)

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what licences have been issued over the past year for the killing of *(a)* peregrines and *(b)* sparrowhawks; and for what reasons they were issued. [50455]

Angela Eagle: Details of licences issued under Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to kill and take birds are contained in Reports by the United Kingdom to the European Community on Derogations under Article 9 of the Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (79/409/EEC). The latest report for which figures are available covers 1996, and a copy of this report is in the Library of the House.

Allotments

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many individual allotments existed in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the last year for which figures are available. [50656]

Angela Eagle: The information on the number of individual allotments in each of the years referred to is not available.

The English Allotments Survey published in 1997 by the National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners Limited and Anglia Polytechnic University and financed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions provides the following data on allotment numbers:

1970—532,964 in England and Wales

1977—497,793 in England and Wales

1978—479,301 in England and Wales

1996—296,923 in England plus an estimated 30,000 allotments in Wales.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many acres of land were devoted to public allotments in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the last year for which figures are available. [50657]

Angela Eagle: The information on the acreage of land devoted to public allotments in each of the years referred to is not available.

The English Allotments Survey published in 1997 by the National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners Limited and Anglia Polytechnic University and financed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions provides the following data on allotment acreage:

1970—58,242 in England and Wales

1977—49,873 in England and Wales

1978—49,105 in England and Wales

1996—25,393 in England.

Road Signs

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on his policy on commercial advertising in London upon land having public highway or trunk road status; and how that policy and the factors underlying it have changed since 1990; [50562]

(2) if he will make it his policy that no private street signs will be licensed upon land having trunk road status unless provided in the interests of public safety; [50561]

(3) if he will make a statement on his policy on the granting of licences for street signs or advertising promoting commercial or sectional interests upon land having public highway or trunk road status. [50560]

Dr. Strang *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* All applications for the erection of advertisements on or near public roads are considered with reference to their likely effects on public safety and amenity at their proposed location. Local planning authorities are responsible for advertisement control within the rules laid down in the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 1992, and the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (Amendment) Regulation 1994. The Department's advice to local planning authorities remains as in DOE Circular 5/92. Appendix B sets out the public safety factors to be considered for advertisements on land alongside motorways, trunk roads and other roads. Highway authorities, including the Secretary of State as highway authority for trunk roads,

will take similar considerations into account in deciding whether advertisements should be permitted on land and street furniture that they own.

Train Operating Companies

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what amount is currently paid to the train operating companies in subsidy by the Government; and what controls are exerted by the Government on how this money is spent by the train operating companies. [50668]

Dr. Strang: Support for Passengers Rail Services (SPRS) paid to and premium payments received from train operating companies by the Franchising Director are set out in the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising's Annual Report 1997–98, a copy of which is in the House Library. Where applicable, payments to train operating companies by Passenger Transport Executives are also shown, with further information on PTE support shown in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Annual Report 1998, a copy of which is also in the House Library. The franchise agreements specify the services and standards the train operating companies are contractually required to provide in return for support payments.

Railtrack

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals the Rail Regulator has to increase controls on Railtrack. [50669]

Dr. Strang: Last Autumn the Rail Regulator negotiated changes to Railtrack's network licence which strengthened the company's accountability to the Regulator and increased his enforcement powers. The Regulator has now completed his consultation exercise on Railtrack's recent Network Management Statement. He announced earlier today that, in the light of that consultation, Railtrack has given further commitments to improve network performance and track quality; to address network capacity problems; and to strengthen its processes for meeting the needs of train operators and funders.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures the Rail Regulator proposes to ensure that Railtrack provides value for money over the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. [50670]

Dr. Strang: The Rail Regulator has made it clear that he will ring-fence Railtrack's core regulated activity of managing the domestic network and that any diversification by Railtrack Group plc should not impact on the access charges which may be levied by Railtrack plc.

Rural Affairs

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 3 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *286*, on what occasions since 1 January he has *(a)* issued press releases and *(b)* made public statements on a proposed Rural White Paper. [50765]

Mr. Meacher: We have issued no press releases and made no public statements about a proposed Rural White Paper. We are continuing to consider the best way of presenting our rural policies.

Transport Projects

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has received from local authorities covering the Maidenhead constituency on transport projects qualifying under the category of specific transport projects for which the Treasury recently allocated £500 million; [50849]

(2) when he expects to announce details of the allocation of the £500 million for specific transport projects recently announced by the Treasury. [50852]

Dr. Strang: The Budget included provision for an additional £500 million for public transport over the next three years.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced in the House on 20 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1539–42, that the Government would be providing London Transport with an additional £365 million over the next two years. At least £300 million of this is for investment in the core network, and it will boost investment over the next two years to £1 billion. London Transport announced the details of their Tube 2000 investment programme on 11 June.

New funding of £50 million per year for three years is being made available across the UK for public transport in rural areas. England's share of this is £41.7 million. A provisional allocation to local authorities of the additional support for rural bus services (£32.5m this financial year) was announced on 28 April. Detailed proposals in this connection were laid before the House on 17 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *206*, including the allocation of £50,584 to Windsor and Maidenhead and £77,436 to Wokingham. As announced in my answer on 3 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *285–86*, we are now consulting on the arrangements for the £5 million Rural Bus Challenge competition which also forms part of this new money. Within the £50 million, £5 million has been set aside for community-based transport initiatives. In England, resources will be channelled through the Rural Development Commission. We are discussing with the Rural Development Commission how best to make use of these resources and have consulted the Local Government Association. An announcement will follow shortly.

No representations have been received from the local authorities covering the Maidenhead constituency on transport projects encompassed by the £500m provision.

Road Use Revenue

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will express the total revenue raised by the Treasury from road-user taxation, including vehicle excise duty, fuel tax and new vehicle tax as a proportion of the total amount spent on maintaining the road network in the most recent year for which figures are available. [50885]

Dr. Strang: In 1996–97 £2.28 billion was spent on maintaining both the trunk and local authority road networks. In the same financial year £21.1 billion (some 925%) was raised in road-user taxation.

Radioactive Waste Management

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the conclusions of the Financial Management and Policy Review of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee; and if he will make a statement. [51257]

Mr. Meacher: I have today published the report of the Steering Committee guiding the Financial Management and Policy Review of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee (RWMAC). Copies of the report which was completed in March 1997, including a list of those who responded to the consultation exercise, have been placed in the Library of the House.

The conclusion of the prior options stage of the Review were announced by my predecessor on 28 November 1996. This was that RWMAC should continue to operate for at least the next five years. It was also announced at that time that the Steering Committee would go on to consider the structure and operation of RWMAC. The report being published today sets out the considerations leading to the decision that RWMAC should continue, and the Steering Committee's proposals for modifying the structure and operation of the Committee to suit current requirements.

The Government welcome the majority of the Steering Committee's recommendations but have given further consideration to two of the recommendations; the membership template and the deletion of 'civil' from RWMAC's terms of reference to reflect its practice, now well established under invitation, of also considering the management of radioactive waste from defence establishments.

The membership template has been amended to place a greater emphasis on environmental and social perspectives and lay perspectives. The new membership template printed below will become an attachment to all copies of the Steering Committee's report.

Consideration of the proposed amendment to RWMAC's terms of reference will be deferred until the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology has reported on nuclear waste management.

My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales and I have accepted all the other recommendations made by the Steering Committee.

RWMAC Membership template

Specialism	*Indicative organisation(s) from which members drawn*	*Proposed number*
Nuclear and radioactive waste management	Industry, consultancies, overseas operator	4
Geology, hydrogeology, geochemistry, chemical modelling	University, research institute or private sector	4
Industrial waste management, pollution control	Non-nuclear industry	1
Radiological protection	NRPB	1
Environmental health/medical health	Medical Research Council, university, medical research, charity or hospital health physicist	2
Local government/planning	Local authorities, NGOs	1
Environmental and societal perspectives	Environmental NGOs and associated individuals relevant university disciplines	3
Health and safety	Trades unions, regulators	1
Environmental law	Academia or private practice	1
Lay interests	Various	1
Total		19

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Building Europe Together

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the publications printed under the Building Europe Together project and released in the United Kingdom. [46068]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The following publications were produced under the Building Europe Together programme: fact sheets on some of the areas covered by the Amsterdam Treaty; booklets entitled, "The Citizen's guide to the Treaty of Amsterdam" and "The Treaty of Amsterdam: Questions and Answers". The factsheets were made available on the internet. The booklets were available from the Commission Representation in the UK.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48669]

Mr. Fatchett: In 1997, FCO replied to 84.7 per cent. (17,997) of the 21,248 letters received from members of the public within 20 working days of receipt.

FCO Departments record the dates of receipt of letters from members of the public and issue of replies, and the proportion of their replies issued within the 20 day target.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49803]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* This Department is able to receive electronic correspondence from hon. Members and members of the public via an interactive form on its website (www.fco.gov.uk). Where possible, we are happy to reply electronically.

European Structural Funds

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his Department's role in discussions relating to the future of the European structural funds for the period 2000 to 2006. [48775]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry on 2 July 1998 *Official Report* column *240.*

Centre for Citizens and the Media

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the *(a)* mandate and *(b)* budget of the Centre for Citizens and the Media in DGX. [49646]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The centre for citizens and the media and DGX aims to increase dialogue between the Commission and the general public and journalists. It is responsible for organising programmes for groups visiting the Commission (over 34,000 people in 1997); selecting sponsored visitors from third countries (with the EP); managing the public inquiries service "Europe Direct"; setting up a Commission call centre to respond to telephone inquiries; managing the Commission's internal databases; training speakers available to give talks on the EU and the euro; supporting training on European affairs for journalists; developing links between twinned towns. The centre's budget for 1998 is 4.9 mecu (£3.26 million at current prices). It manages an additional 10 mecu (£6.66 million) for town-twinning projects.

EU Funds

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a list of the *(a)* organisations and *(b)* projects which received funding under budget line A-3024 and A-3104 for 1997. [49643]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on 29 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *67.*

General Affairs Council

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 13 and 14 July. [51259]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The information is as follows.

A General Affairs Council was held in Brussels on 13 July. The Council agreed the 37 A Points listed in document 10255/98 and noted the European Parliament's Resolutions, Decisions and Opinions taken at its part sessions in Strasbourg on 15–19 June and 1–2 July, and listed in documents 9471/98 and 9533/98. Copies of both these documents will be placed in the House Library as soon as they become available.

The Council endorsed the Austrian Presidency's handling plan and timetable for the Agenda 2000 package. Over lunch Ministers discussed the working methods of the General Affairs Council.

The mandates for negotiations with Norway and Iceland over their continued involvement with Schengen after entry into force of Amsterdam were briefly discussed. A few points remain to be settled; but the Presidency made clear that it would aim for the adoption of the mandates before the summer.

Ministers condemned the violation by Belarus of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations in its actions against Ambassadors' residences in Drozdy. As a signal of the seriousness with which it took the situation, the EU had already adopted a Common Position imposing an entry visa ban on all members of the Government and senior officials of the Republic of Belarus. The Council expressed its determination to adopt further measures should further violations of the Vienna Convention occur. It will continue to monitor the situation in Minsk and demanded concrete proposals from the Belarus authorities. The EU hoped that early action by the Belarusian Government to respect fully the Vienna Convention would enable a return to the status quo ante and facilitate the development of the more constructive EU/Belarus relationship which the EU wished.

The Council expressed its grave concern at the continuing violence and loss of life in Kosovo, particularly among the civilian population. The danger of a rapid widening of the crisis remains. The Council reiterated its call for an immediate cessation of all hostilities and the restart of a political process, with direct international involvement, between the parties. The Kosovo Albanian team for these talks must be able to speak authoritatively and therefore be fully representative of their community. The Council accordingly called on the leaders with the Kosovo Albanian community to unite and to make common cause to this end.

The Council recalled that a solution for Kosovo can be found neither through the maintenance of the status quo nor through independence, but through a special status, including a large degree of autonomy within the FRY. The Council welcomed the intention of the Contact Group to set in hand work, to which the EU is actively contributing, to define possible further elements for the future status of Kosovo with a view to making them available to the parties. It emphasised that international involvement in the dialogue remains an essential element of credible negotiations.

The Council discussed the situation in Albania. It strongly encouraged the Government of Prime Minister Nano to follow a policy of restraint and moderation in the Kosovo crisis, which is now more necessary than ever. It expressed its concern about the flow of arms from northern Albania to Kosovo Albanian armed groups. It called on all political organisations in Albania to support the policy of the Albanian government and to associate themselves with the line taken by the European Union on

the Kosovo issue. At the same time it called upon the Albanian Government to increase its efforts to stop the flow of weapons from Albania to Kosovo.

The Council was encouraged by General Abubakar's commitment to national reconciliation leading to the restoration of democratic civilian rule and his decision to release a significant number of detainees. The Council urged General Abubakar to release all the remaining detainees and to announce his plans for the electoral process. They reiterated EU's readiness to support an inclusive political process.

The Council heard a report on the EU troika Ambassadors' visit to East Timor from 27–30 June. It paid tribute to the way the members of the troika handled the difficult situation which arose and agreed that their report and conclusions should continue to be followed up by the competent Council bodies.

The Council discussed the situation in Guinea Bissau and agreed that there was a need for humanitarian assistance and the opening of corridors for it to be delivered. It stressed the need for political and diplomatic solution to the problems and agreed that the EU should commit itself to a reconstruction programme on the basis of democratic conditions and the maintenance of the elections planned for this year and the next.

The Council adopted conclusions inviting COREPER and the Commission to solve rapidly the problems emerging from the ECJ's recent judgment on spending without a legal base.

The Council expressed the hope that the Conference nearing its conclusion in Rome would result in agreement to establish a credible International Criminal Court.

The UK and seven EU partners drew the Council's attention to a joint statement deploring the Commission's decision to impose provisional anti-dumping duties on imports of unbleached cotton fabric from six non-EU countries.

The first EU-Tunisia Association Council was held on 14 July, following the entry into force of the EU/Tunisia Association Agreement earlier this year. A dinner with the Tunisian Foreign Minister was held on 13 July. Ministers welcomed the new agreement, as part of wider moves towards a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by 2010, and discussed issues of common interest including developments in the middle east peace process, human rights, and inward investment.

The inaugural Co-operation Council under the terms of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA), between the EU and Moldova took place on 14 July. Over a working breakfast, Ministers had an exchange of views on foreign policy issues of mutual interest (including the situation in Transdniestra) and EU/Moldova relations. The Council itself exchanged views on the implementation of the PCA and adopted the Rules of Procedure establishing the foundations for the future work of the Co-operation Council and Committee, as well as the Joint Work Programme for 1998–99.

The first EU/Mexico Joint Council was held on 14 July. It renewed the EU and Mexico's shared commitment to closer ties, including through the substantial and reciprocal liberalisation of trade in goods and services.

Nazi Persecution Victims

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who will benefit from the United Kingdom's contribution to the International Fund for Needy Victims of Nazi Persecution. [51260]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have announced that the UK's £1 million contribution to the Fund will be divided in the following way: two thirds will go through the World Jewish Restitution Organisation to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for projects providing medical care to needy survivors of Nazi persecution in the Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Moldova. The remaining third will go to the Board of Deputies of British Jews for needy survivors in the UK. Non-Jewish survivors will also be able to apply to these organisations for assistance.

Nigeria

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning changes to the timetable for a handover to civilian rule in Nigeria. [50719]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have heard nothing further since my answer to the right hon. and learned Member's previous question of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *580*.

North Korea

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to North Korea following the latest incidents involving infiltration into South Korean territory. [50717]

Mr. Fatchett: The UK does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea and no talks between officials have been held since these incidents.

In his capacity as a member of the United Nations Command, our Defence Attaché in Seoul has taken part in the investigations into these events. He is also participating in the General Officer talks between the US-led United Nations Command and the North Korean People's Army, to discuss the 1953 armistice agreement and related issues arising from the latest incidents.

North Korea has recently expressed an interest in political dialogue with the EU. Any such dialogue would need to include the subject of the recent incursions by the North.

Iraq

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress in inspecting Iraqi missile warheads alleged to contain traces of VX. [50721]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: On 24 June, UNSCOM Chairman Richard Butler informed the UN Security Council that results of tests on missile warhead fragments removed from Iraq earlier this year had uncovered evidence that Iraq put VX and VX stabiliser into the warheads. These tests were carried out at a Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) accredited laboratory in the US.

UNSCOM is now arranging for further tests to be made on fresh samples at other accredited laboratories in France and Switzerland.

Biological Weapons

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made in negotiations on the development of an international agreement on biological weapons. [50718]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Since 1994 an ad hoc group of states parties has been meeting in Geneva to consider measures to strengthen the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. UK officials chair the key sessions on compliance measures at these negotiations. The ad hoc group has made good progress and is now working on the rolling text of a draft Protocol to the Convention. 1998 has seen a significant intensification of the negotiations. Much detailed work remains to be done but the United Kingdom, together with its EU partners, believes that an effective package of measures could be agreed during 1999.

West Bank

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what developments there have been in discussions on the future status of land in the West Bank; and if he will make a statement. [50720]

Mr. Fatchett: Discussions on the second Israeli redeployment continue between the parties and the US. We await an Israeli response to the latest US proposals. The talks have been made more difficult by the recent announcement of the Israeli Government, proposing an extension to the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to include certain territory on the West Bank. We regard this development as serious and damaging to the prospects for peace in the middle east. We supported a UN Security Council Presidential Statement to this effect on 13 July 1998.

Cyprus

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations he has had with Britain's EU partners concerning the proposed deployment of missiles in Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [50722]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The intention of the Cyprus Government to deploy S300 missiles to Cyprus has been discussed with EU partners on a number of occasions. The overwhelming majority share UK concern that deployment would exacerbate tension in the region. We have expressed this concern to the Government of Cyprus and shall continue to do so.

Our views are widely shared internationally. In May this year, the G8 expressed concern that new developments in the military sphere, including any increase in force levels and the upgrading of sophisticated weaponry, would risk further raising tension in the region. The UN Security Council last month called on all parties to avoid any actions which might increase tension, including through the further expansion of military forces and armaments on Cyprus.

We continue to believe that there are better ways to assure the prosperity and security of Cyprus than an increase in armaments. Measures to reduce military tension have a role to play, but the best way is by means of a comprehensive political settlement. We continue to work actively in support of the UN-led peace process and we look to others, in particular the leaders of both Cypriot communities, to do the same.

Sierra Leone

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *580*, to whom indemnities relative to the Sierra Leone arms investigation have been given. [50858]

Mr. Robin Cook: As is normal practice in investigations of this kind, indemnities have been granted in relation to any legal action taken against Sir Thomas Legg, Sir Robin Ibbs and the secretariat of the investigation.

British Overseas Territories

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to grant British citizenship to citizens of British Overseas Territories. [50886]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The possibility of granting citizenship to citizens of the Overseas Territories is under active discussion between all Departments involved. We are looking at the issue sympathetically, but more work needs to be done before any announcement can be made. The result of this review will be made public in the forthcoming White Paper on the Overseas Territories.

UNITA

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government have taken in respect of the chief UNITA representative in the United Kingdom, Mr. Anibal Kandeya, to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1127 (1997); and what knowledge his Department has of his whereabouts. [50447]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

An application from Mr. Kandeya for further leave to remain in the United Kingdom is currently under consideration. No action may be taken to deport or otherwise remove him until this application has been resolved. I understand that Mr. Kandeya remains in the United Kingdom and is in contact with my Department.

PRIME MINISTER

EU Cardiff Summit

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what environmental issues were considered when planning and implementing the EU Cardiff Summit, in respect of *(a)* energy use, *(b)* transport arrangements and *(c)* use of recyclable materials for catering; and what actions were taken. [47882]

The Prime Minister: We tried wherever possible to take environmental issues into account when planning and implementing the European Council Meeting in Cardiff. Large multilateral meetings inevitably involve high energy consumption, because of the number of people involved (around 4,000 in this case), the equipment they use and the technical facilities involved. These included a media centre for the use of up to 2,500 people, interpretation facilities, extra lighting in the meeting rooms and in press briefing rooms for the use of the television crews. By using a self contained island site for the meeting and associated activities, we were able to keep use of cars to the minimum consistent with the normal courtesy to visiting Head of Governments and their security. The catering contractor used routinely has all paper, glass, steel and other metals collected for recycling.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what matters relating to radioactive releases from Sellafield were discussed with his Norwegian counterpart on 6 July; and what conclusions were reached. [49748]

The Prime Minister: During our meeting on 6 July, I reassured Prime Minister Bondevik that all discharges of radioactive material from Sellafield into European coastal waters were subject to licensing by the Environment Agency, that present levels were being reviewed and that levels were always set well within the threshold of what might pose a threat to public health. We agreed that our Environment Ministers should discuss the issue when they meet later this year.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, (Mr. Hague) of 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 1066, what potential sources of the leak of the Strategic Defence Review will be considered by the leak inquiry. [50536]

The Prime Minister: The independent investigator appointed by the Cabinet Office to conduct the inquiry into the leak of the Strategic Defence Review will determine what sources should be considered by the leak inquiry.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister when copies of the Strategic Defence Review were first provided to *(a)* Opposition parties and *(b)* the media. [50537]

The Prime Minister: Copies of the Strategic Defence Review were first given by the Government under the usual embargo terms to the Defence spokesmen for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) and the hon. and learned member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell) at a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence at 11.00am on 8 July.

The media received their first copies from the Government at a Press Conference held at the Ministry of Defence Main Building at 1.15pm on 8 July. Attendance was restricted to those who had agreed to be locked in until sometime after my right hon. Friend had started his statement to the House of Commons.

These procedures are fully in line with the usual arrangements.

Ministerial Code

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will amend the Ministerial Code to place a requirement on Ministers to correct significant factual inaccuracies. [50532]

The Prime Minister: Paragraph 1 of the Ministerial Code requires Ministers to give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest possible opportunity.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Prime Minister what target his Office sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49820]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend, the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Government Buildings (Passes)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the *(a)* occasions on which and *(b)* reasons for which passes to Government buildings have been issued to persons not employed by or under contract to a Government Department. [50613]

The Prime Minister: Most Government Departments operate a system of entry control to their buildings based on an assessment of the risk to their assets, the sole or shared ownership and occupancy of the site, and whether the public have right of entry to it. Practice can vary considerably, therefore, between Government sites, but entry control requiring registration and the use of visitors' passes is commonplace. Such passes are normally issued on a daily basis and must be surrendered on departure from the premises. Holders of these passes may require escorting. Of course details of the thousands of such passes issued daily at all Government buildings throughout the country is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Car Parking Charges

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations members of the No. 10 Policy Unit have had with supermarket owners, their representatives or advisers concerning the possibility of taxes or charges on car parking spaces at out-of-town shopping centres and at supermarkets. [50158]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *94*.

We have carried out an extensive consultation as part of the fundamental review of transport policy. My Ministers and I, and our special advisers, have met a large number of individuals and organisations and have attended a number of seminars to discuss a wide range of transport issues. The discussions and the written representations we received have played an important role in informing the development of our integrated transport policy, following our consultation document "Developing an Integrated Transport Policy: an Invitation to Contribute".

Roger Liddle

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister what factors led him to appoint Mr. Liddle as his special adviser; and what are his responsibilities. [50347]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I considered a variety of factors when appointing the members of my Policy Unit, the most important of which was their ability to carry out the duties required of them effectively and well. His responsibilities include European policy and defence policy.

Derek Draper

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister what is the Government's current policy in respect of ministerial contact with Mr. Draper. [50348]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 94.

Legal Drugs Tsar

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister if he will appoint a tsar to reduce the deaths and addictions caused by the mis-use of medicinal and other legal drugs. [50485]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* Misuse should occur only when prescribers or patients use medicines outside the authorised conditions. Doctors and other healthcare professionals are individually responsible for the products they prescribe and must be able to justify, if necessary, their prescribing decisions. In particular, prescribing over large quantities or for excessive periods could be taken up as a terms of service issue or by the General Medical Council as professional disciplinary matter.

Medicines are authorised for the United Kingdom market only after thorough and expert evaluation by the Medicines Control Agency, advised by the Committee on Safety of Medicines. The MCA continues to monitor the safety of medicines after they have been placed on the market and exposed to a greater population than in pre-authorisation tests. Medicines are authorised for use in very specific circumstances and any contraindications and warnings are shown clearly both to prescribers in the summary of product characteristics and to patients in information leaflets. We are satisfied that regulatory control, together with information and guidance to healthcare and patients, provides the necessary safeguards.

Civil Servants (Information)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what guidance is given to members of his Policy Unit concerning participation in events held under Chatham House rules. [50465]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* Members of my Policy Unit are covered by the same rules as other civil servants, which are set out in the answer given to my hon. Friend by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 15 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 205.

CABINET OFFICE

Derek Draper

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Minister without Portfolio, pursuant to his answer of 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 679, on how many occasions his office received draft articles written by Mr. Derek Draper for scrutiny prior to their publication in the press since 1 May 1997. [50837]

Mr. Mandelson: None.

Lobbyists

Mr. Spring: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the lobbying firms to which he routinely faxes *(a)* press releases and *(b)* other information about his ministerial activities. [50733]

Mr. Mandelson: None.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Minister without Portfolio on what occasions he has met *(a)* Mr. Derek Draper, *(b)* GPC Market Access representatives, *(c)* Mr. Roger Liddle and *(d)* Lawson, Lucas Mendelsohn representatives in respect of his ministerial responsibilities. [50734]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 678–79. I meet Mr. Liddle and other members of the No. 10 Policy Unit on a regular basis during the course of my official duties.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Small Businesses

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has to reduce the level of bureaucracy affecting small business; and if he will make a statement. [49375]

Dr. David Clark: I am committed to publishing new guidance, produced by the Better Regulation Unit, which will require Government Departments to make an assessment of risk, cost and benefits of any new regulations affecting business, charities, consumers and, in particular, small business. I hope to publish this guidance by the end of the summer.

In addition, the Access Business Group, chaired by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, (which includes representatives of central

Government, business and local government) is continuing its work to make the regulatory system more transparent, accessible and helpful.

At the European level, I am working with the European Commission to establish a new mechanism for consulting business direct on new regulatory proposals. A pilot test panel of European businesses, agreed under the UK Presidency, will enable the voice of British business, including small firms, to be heard in Brussels and help reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Olympic Bid 2012

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment the Government have made of London's capability to host the Olympic Games in 2012. [50234]

Mr. Banks: The British Olympic Association has decided that the next bid for the Olympic Games should be London-based. Like the BOA, the Government is determined that any bid should be of the highest possible quality. My Department is already working closely with the BOA who are conducting comprehensive studies on what is already in place and what needs to be in place to mount a winnable bid, which might well be for the 2012 Games. The BOA makes the nomination in respect of this country and ultimately the decision is entirely a matter for the International Olympic Committee.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what target he sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49832]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Public Service on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the e-mail address of his Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49834]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Department's Support Unit can be contacted at the following e-mail address: msu@culture.gov.uk.

However, all DCMS Ministers can be contacted at their own e-mail addresses which are published on my Department's website (www.culture.gov.uk) as follows:

chris.smith@culture.gov.uk
mark.fisher@culture.gov.uk
tony.banks@culture.gov.uk
tom.clarke@culture.gov.uk.

Commonwealth Games

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will attend the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Malaysia; and if he will make a statement. [49964]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Government will be represented by a Minister from DCMS. I know the games will be a great success, and I extend my very best wishes to all the British competitors.

NESTA

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the process whereby Lord Puttnam was appointed chairman of NESTA; who made the decision; what consultations were carried out; what are his terms of employment and salary; and what is his budget for staff and expenses. [50737]

Mr. Chris Smith: The process for the appointment of the Chairman of NESTA was based on the principles set down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Potential candidates were generated from several sources, including a widespread consultation exercise in which over 250 bodies were asked to suggest names, advertisements in national newspapers and suggestions from within Government. All candidates were considered objectively against the same criteria. Lord Puttnam was one of a number who were interviewed by a panel with independent membership. On the basis of its consideration of written applications and of its interviews, the panel recommended to me that Lord Puttnam was eminently suitable for appointment and, in the light of this he was appointed by me after further consultation with colleagues in Government.

Lord Puttnam has been appointed for a period of three years from 13 July 1998, at a salary of £22,000 per annum for two days' work per week. The budget for NESTA's staff and expenses will be a matter for NESTA's Board, within the resources available to them. The National Lottery Act 1998 allows me to place a limit or limits on NESTA's running costs expenditure, including staffing costs. I have not currently set any such limit. I and my Ministerial colleagues have however repeatedly made clear that we see NESTA and a slimline, unbureaucratic body employing no more than thirty staff.

British Holidaymakers

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the latest statistics on the numbers of British people taking holidays *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* abroad; and what is his estimate of the current spending difference. [50744]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The British Tourist Authority (BTA) collects statistics on the number of British people taking holidays in the United Kingdom and abroad in its annual British National Travel Survey.

The BTA has published the figures for 1997, the latest year for which information is available, in the April 1998 edition of "Tourism Intelligence Quarterly": these figures show that the British spent £17,220m on holidays abroad of four or more nights, £12,410m more than the £4,810m they spent on holidays of four or more nights in Britain.

Information on short break holidays of less than four nights will be available later in the Summer when the national tourist boards publish their annual United Kingdom Tourism Survey.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Learning Disabilities

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures she proposes to take to improve the standards of health services for people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. [49978]

Mr. Worthington: People with a learning disability have access to the full range of health services in Northern Ireland, in keeping with the Government's social inclusion policy. We are committed to continuous improvement of the standards of these services. Our agenda for improvement is set out in "Well Into 2000", published by the Department of Health and Social Services in 1997.

Railways

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if her Department will conduct an investigation into the number and thoroughness of safety checks made by Northern Ireland Railways; and if she will make a statement. [49980]

Mr. Paul Murphy: On 7 July 1998 my noble Friend Lord Dubs, Minister for the Environment in Northern Ireland, announced the appointment of Mr. Christopher Hall, one of Her Majesty's Principal Inspector of Railways to review the conduct and outcome of the current NIR inquiries into 3 recent railways accidents in Northern Ireland and to make recommendation on the further steps, if any, which may need to be taken to address identified safety deficiencies.

The Minister also announced that Northern Ireland Railways would be commissioning a wider safety scrutiny of NIR operations under terms of reference to be agreed with HM Railway Inspectorate. A senior Railways Inspector will help oversee the wider scrutiny which will include NIR's safety procedures and checks. The main findings and recommendations of the inquiry and the NIR audit will be made public.

I have arranged for a copy of the terms of reference of the inquiry to be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what actions the Department of Environment is taking to acquire additional funding for Northern Ireland Railways under the Private Finance Initiative. [49979]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Department of the Environment is examining with Northern Ireland Railways, the Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury the desirability and practicability of a Private Finance Initiative solution for the replacement of suburban rolling stock and for the provision of integrated bus and rail ticketing and related services.

This consideration is ongoing.

Selective Education

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to her answer of 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *4–5*, what is the exact remit of the major research project on the effects of the selective system on secondary education in Northern Ireland. [49997]

Mr. Worthington: The terms of reference for the major research project on the effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland are as follows:

1. To investigate the effects on pupils and their families, teachers, schools and the community of the existing selective structure of secondary education in Northern Ireland, in order to provide a better basis for informed debate on the future structure of secondary education. Particular attention needs to be given to the identification of any differences in opportunity and performance in respect of different socio-economic groups, and especially between the constituent parts of the Northern Ireland community, which may result from the present system and structures. The study should also examine the inter-related effects of selection and open enrolment.
2. To prepare a Final Report setting out the key findings, supported by quantitative and qualitative evidence, and highlighting the main issues emerging for consideration in light of the research. This report should draw together all the relevant aspects, but may be supported by more detailed papers as necessary. Interim Reports on specific aspects of the project should be prepared and presented to the Department on a schedule to be agreed at the outset of the assignment. The main focus should be on the effects of the selective structure of the secondary sector, though attention should also be given to the effects of the Transfer Procedure. The study should consider how well the present structure serves to *promote learning* through fostering values and attitudes; raising standards of learning, and providing opportunities for personal development and fulfilment.

The research team should consult with the DENI Inspectorate where appropriate. The following points should be covered in the investigation and the report:

I Pupils

a. effects of selection on achievement at GCSE level for all groups, including comparison of patterns of achievement by those of similar ability who attend selective and non-selective secondary schools;

b. effect on patterns of school leavers' destinations, including routes into employment, FE, HE and training and

c. effects on motivation, self-esteem and social attitudes.

II Teachers:

a. effects on teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils; and

b. effects on teacher motivation and performance.

III Secondary Schools:

a. for both selective and non-selective secondary schools:

opportunities and constraints in the curriculum, and in particular an assessment of the extent of which selective and non-selective schools provide alternative pathways which meet the different needs of pupils, and the extent to which academic, vocational and pastoral provision are appropriate to the capabilities and needs of all pupils;

an analysis of the extent and impact of transfer of pupils between selective and non-selective schools; and

the extent to which NI has more small secondary schools than would be necessary in a non-selective system, and the implications, if any;

b. For non-selective schools:

trends in enrolment, and especially the implications of a reduced proportion of higher achieving pupils attending these schools as a result of the increased intakes to selective schools consequent on open enrolment;

the extent to which the performance of non-selective schools reflects the quality of their intake;

analysis of the changes in the pattern of ability levels on intake over the last ten years, and the resulting effects on performance; and

the restoration of pupil self-confidence and motivation in Key Stage 3.

c. for selective schools:

the extent to which the performance of selective schools reflects the quality of their intake;

the extent to which selective schools have adapted their curricular provision to address the wider range of abilities attending these schools as a result of open enrolment; and

sustaining performance of lower, achieving pupils.

IV Primary Schools

a. the researchers should consult with the DENI Inspectorate and CCEA on their findings on the effects of the Transfer Procedure on the implementation of the curriculum, and the nature and content of learning in Key Stage 2.

b. the extent of coaching, the reasons why it is sought, and the costs and other implications for pupils, parents and schools; and

c. the consequences of perceptions of transfer procedure performance for enrolment patterns of primary schools.

V Society

a. the effects on attitudes to education in both young people and adults;

b. an analysis of the reasons why some parents choose not to enter their children for the transfer tests; and

c. the effects of selection on how individuals are perceived by parents, employers, and tertiary education and training providers.

Assembly

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to transfer responsibility for decisions regarding the future of hospitals in Northern Ireland to the Northern Ireland Assembly. [49983]

Mr. Paul Murphy: As envisaged by the Belfast Agreement [Cd 3883], the Government intend to bring forward legislation shortly which will provide for the transfer to the Northern Ireland Assembly of full legislative and executive authority in respect of those matters currently within the responsibility of the six Northern Ireland Government Departments. This will include the transfer of responsibility for decisions regarding the future of hospitals in Northern Ireland.

Student Tuition Fees

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if students from Northern Ireland holding British-Irish dual nationality will have their fourth-year fees waived if they attend a Scottish institution of higher education. [49984]

Mr. Worthington: No. Eligibility for support towards tuition fees is based on a residence requirement, not nationality.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures the Department of Health and Social Services is taking to ensure that equipment in general practitioner surgeries will be millennium compliant by 31 December. [49981]

Mr. Worthington: The Department has written to all GP practices to raise awareness of the Year 2000 issues. It has also facilitated the establishment by the 4 Health and Social Services boards of a special inter-Board Year 2000 Primary Care Group to co-ordinate action and advice necessary to ensure a proper response to the Year 2000 problem across the whole of primary care.

Guidance on Year 2000 has already been issued to all GP practices and further guidance specified to embedded systems in GP practices is currently being prepared for issue.

The inter-Board group is arranging for a detailed Year 2000 audit of selected exemplar practices. Results from this audit will be used to inform other practices and will provide a basis for awareness-training for practice staff during Autumn 1998.

A detailed questionnaire has been issued by HSS Boards to each GP practice seeking information by end-July 1998 on Year 2000 compliance progress.

The Department will continue to monitor Boards' progress in respect of GP practice Year 2000 compliance.

Police (Clear-up Rates)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the clear-up rate for recorded offences in each police district in Northern Ireland in the last five years for which figures are available. [50192]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The percentage clear-up rates for each sub-division of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is shown in the table:

Division/Sub-Division	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
A Musgrave Street	45.1	43.5	45.7	47.0	40.2
Mountpottinger	27.5	29.4	32.4	28.5	26.1
Donegall Pass	27.7	22.6	19.9	22.4	24.6
Dunmurry	28.4	25.3	25.7	24.7	22.9
B Grosvenor Road	31.0	29.6	30.4	26.3	21.8
Lisburn	40.7	35.0	30.9	27.0	29.7
Woodburn	33.0	34.4	27.0	23.8	21.0
D North Queen Street	32.8	31.5	31.7	30.3	27.7
Antrim Road	34.9	32.8	32.4	30.4	26.1
Antrim	35.3	28.4	32.1	28.8	23.8
Newtownabbey	32.8	32.6	35.8	32.8	27.8
Carrickfergus	38.7	37.8	37.9	35.1	36.5
Tennant Street	36.8	32.5	34.6	33.3	33.9
E Bangor	29.6	29.6	32.9	30.8	23.5
Strandtown	29.7	30.8	35.1	30.3	29.2
Castlereagh	30.7	30.7	33.9	31.7	31.4
G Newtownards	35.8	39.1	39.1	38.1	38.6
Downpatrick	41.3	38.1	35.9	34.6	34.1
Newcastle	28.8	26.5	26.7	27.4	27.9
H Armagh	35.1	48.1	43.4	42.2	37.0
Newry	42.0	41.3	38.3	31.3	29.7
J Portadown	40.4	39.4	40.0	32.1	31.6
Lurgan	44.1	41.0	38.4	27.2	33.7
Banbridge	44.6	37.4	39.3	32.6	32.5
K Dungannon	38.6	57.6	38.8	42.7	42.5
Cookstown	42.8	44.7	43.4	41.9	38.1
L Enniskillen	40.4	42.1	45.6	39.2	40.6
Lisnaskea	50.8	52.4	46.2	43.8	47.4
Omagh	46.8	51.7	40.1	39.4	38.6
N Strand Road	42.6	46.6	46.3	39.2	33.8
Strabane	45.7	54.6	57.7	47.0	39.7
Waterside	41.5	44.1	42.2	38.1	37.2
O Coleraine	38.3	33.7	37.2	38.5	33.0
Limavady	42.8	47.0	46.2	41.0	39.4
Magherafelt	42.8	48.8	51.4	43.5	42.0
P Ballymena	32.4	31.2	36.1	42.4	33.4
Ballymoney	46.7	45.1	38.5	42.1	43.2
Larne	42.2	39.5	40.2	36.2	38.7

Motorists (Crimes)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many motorists were *(a)* charged with and *(b)* convicted of (i) failure to accord precedence at pedestrian crossings, (ii) failure to comply with traffic signs, (iii) speeding offences, (iv) driving after consuming alcohol or taking drugs and (v) reckless driving in Northern Ireland in (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [50191]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The information requested at *(a)* is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The table shows the number of persons against whom proceedings have been taken and the number found guilty.

Offence	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Failing to stop at a pelican crossing				
Proceeded against	0	2	0	0
Found guilty	0	1	0	0
Failure to comply with traffic signs				
Proceeded against	260	278	205	226
Found guilty	236	260	186	203
Speeding offences				
Proceeded against	2,400	2,279	2,423	3,039
Found guilty	2,360	2,204	2,349	2,948
Drink/drugs related motoring offences				
Proceeded against	3,224	3,019	2,596	2,443
Found guilty	3,127	2,939	2,501	2,350
Reckless driving offences				
Proceeded against	364	445	368	353
Found guilty	339	408	329	324

Pedestrian Accidents

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* children and *(b)* adults were (i) killed, (ii) seriously injured and (iii) slightly injured on or near pedestrian crossings in Northern Ireland in (1) 1994, (2) 1995, (3) 1996 and (4) 1997. [50222]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The number of casualties on or near pedestrian crossings for the years in question are shown in the table.

Year	*Killed*	*Serious injury*	*Slight injury*
1994			
Children	1	18	48
Adults	5	34	123
1995			
Children	1	24	57
Adults	8	39	102
1996			
Children	1	15	61
Adults	3	35	125
1997			
Children	1	17	67
Adults	4	40	111

Irish Language

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of people in Northern Ireland who speak Irish. [50225]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The most reliable information is from the last Census in 1991 when a total of 142,003 people in Northern Ireland claimed some degree of ability in the Irish language with 131,974 indicating an ability to speak Irish. Revised figures will be available after the next Census in 2001.

Narey Report

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress the Northern Ireland Prison Service has made in implementing the recommendation of the Narey report which was laid before this House on 2 April. [51261]

Mr. Ingram: The Narey Report contained 59 recommendations mainly concerned with improving security at HMP Maze. Management of Maze has made considerable progress in taking forward those recommendations.

Forty recommendations relate specifically to procedural and operational matters. Of these, 23 either have been, or are about to be, implemented. These include revised procedures for children's parties which will be applied to the annual summer children's parties over the coming weeks. Twelve require further work and five have been referred to Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons for advice.

Fifteen recommendations, some of which will involve the provision of additional physical security measures, relate to staff-search procedures, the staffing and security arrangements for visits and the protection of the Block-roofs. A considerable amount of work has already been done by the three working groups and further work is in hand. In particular enhanced searching and training has been introduced and a new system of roof protection has been devised and is being piloted.

Four recommendations dealt mainly with matters which the Northern Ireland Prison Service was required to consider. Two have been implemented and a third awaits greater clarity on the future of the prison in the medium term. The post of Governor has been advertised but as yet a suitable candidate has not been found, and other options are being pursued.

The Narey Report pointed the way forward for improving security at HMP Maze. A good deal of progress has been made. The prison is now a safer and more secure environment but we are determined to ensure that momentum for improvement will be maintained. To this end, and going beyond the Narey recommendations, we have introduced a Security Audit Unit to continuously monitor and report on security standards in all establishments.

Industrial Research and Technology Unit

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what key performance targets have been set for the Industrial Research and Technology Unit for the financial year 1998–99. [51263]

Marjorie Mowlam: IRTU's key strategic targets are to raise the level of industrial R&D in Northern Ireland and to operate efficiently and effectively. In that context, the following key targets have been set for the agency for 1998–99.

1. To achieve new user participation in the Compete Programme of 10 per cent.
2. To increase the average industry contribution to projects funded under the Compete Programme by 1 per cent.
3. To achieve an increase in R&D projects under the pre-competitive Start Programme of 20 per cent.
4. To achieve full cost recovery for scientific services.
5. To maintain UKAS Accreditation for Scientific Services.

Business Development Service

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what key performance targets have been set for the Business Development Service to be achieved by April 1999. [51264]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Business Development Service is an executive agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. I have set a number of key performance targets for the Agency to achieve by April 1999, as follows:

- at least 90 per cent. of customers to be satisfied with the services that they have received;
- at least 90 per cent. of customers to be satisfied with the way in which services were provided to them;
- to achieve levels of efficiency savings in total running costs of 3 per cent. over the allocation for 1997–1998;
- to demonstrate, on a national basis and within the context of service level agreements (where these apply), that the Agency would recover the full cost of its operations from its customers; and
- to achieve the Investors in People (IIP) standard by 31 March 1998.

Copies of the Agency's Corporate and Business Plans for 1998 to 2001 have been placed in the Library.

WALES

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49827]

Mr. Ron Davies *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* My Department has no plans at present to communicate routinely with Members of Parliament and the public by electronic means, although external e-mail facilities will be available later this year. The Department will use whatever form of communication is appropriate to suit particular circumstances.

Carmarthenshire NHS Trust

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *504*, on the proposed location of the headquarters for the Carmarthenshire NHS trust, if he will publish the policy guidelines referred to. [50538]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The policy guidelines are those detailed in the Capital Investment Manual. The manual provides detailed guidance for each of the main stages of capital schemes. A copy is in the Library.

Dyfed Powys Health Authority

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *503*, if he will provide a breakdown of the recurring additional cost of £285,000; and if this figure is an annual recurring figure. [50531]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The additional costs subject to management arrangements confirmed by the new Trust Board, if approved, will be:

	£
Locality management	200,000
Standardisation	*75,000
Protected staff costs (eg travel costs)	10,000

The first two items will be annual recurring costs, while the third will be phased out in line with changing staff conditions.

Outdoor Education Centres

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on outdoor education centres in Wales; and what financial provision he has made for them in the current financial year. [50482]

Mr. Hain: Outdoor education centres are the responsibility of the operator, usually a local authority or an independent provider. No direct Welsh Office funding is provided for such centres.

Llanllyfni Bypass

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to announce *(a)* the results of the public inquiry and *(b)* his decision on Llanllyfni bypass. [50830]

Mr. Hain: The A487 Llanwnda-Llanllyfni scheme is subject to the current review of the Welsh trunk road programme. A report on the review will be published later this month.

Inward Investment

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the prospects for further inward investment in Wales. [51212]

Mr. Hain: Our track record on inward investment is excellent. Over 300 overseas-owned manufacturing companies employing over 75,000 people in a range of industries including aerospace, consumer and office electronics, automotive components, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. These companies have been attracted by

a number of factors, not least the quality of the workforce, high levels of productivity, a sound infrastructure and the assistance offered by the organisations involved.

The establishment of the National Assembly will strengthen Wales' ability to provide the right environment in which companies can succeed and prosper. Despite increasing competition for inward investment, the prospects for Wales remain good.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *557–58*, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in the current session would affect women; what consultation he had with women's organisations; and if he will make a statement. [49094]

Ms Quin: Guidance on policy appraisal for equal treatment has been available within the Home Office since 1989, with revised guidance issued in August 1997.

Within this Department, where appropriate and possible, we are making use of consultation, research projects and disaggregated statistics to identify the impact of policy on women. For example, we have conducted research aimed at understanding the sentencing of women. Examples of bodies with which I have had correspondence include the Maternity Alliance, Women in Prison and the Mother's Union. Furthermore, the Cabinet Sub Committee on Women's Issues, on which I am the Home Office representative, reviews and develops the Government's policy and strategy on issues of special concern to women and oversees their implementation. The importance of seeing the implications for women of all policies is discussed.

Lobbyists

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the meetings *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* special advisers in his Department have had with lobbying companies since 1 May 1997. [49668]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* Ministers, their Special Advisers and other civil servants meet many people in the course of their work. This properly includes meetings with interest groups outside Government; indeed one of the specific functions of Special Advisers is to liaise with such interest groups. This liaison is intended to help Ministers draw upon outside contributions—from academics, think-tanks, trade and industry associations, trade unions, lobby groups and others, as well as relevant experience from other countries—during the process of policy analysis and development. By convention, it is not the practice of Governments to make information on such meetings or their content publicly available—a principle reflected in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information published in January 1997. Special Advisers and other civil servants must observe the requirements of propriety: for instance, they must not provide confidential information without authorisation or allow improper influence on policy. Any breach of these requirements could be a disciplinary offence.

CS Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1) pursuant to his answer of 16 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *173–74*, on CS spray, if he will place in the Library a copy of the report arising out of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's literature review on possible alternative solvents at the end of 1997; [49998]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 16 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *173–74*, on CS spray, if he will place in the Library a copy of the specification issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers on the purchase of CS sprays; and on what date this specification was issued. [49999]

Mr. Michael: The specification issued jointly by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Police Scientific Development Branch was issued to chief police officers in March 1997. Copies of the specification and of the report arising out of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's literature review of possible alternative solvents are available in the Library.

Non-criminal Prisoners

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost to the public purse of keeping non-criminal offenders (excluding fine defaulters) in prison for each year from 1992 to 1997. [50328]

Ms Quin: The information is not available in the form requested, as the Prison Service does not record costs by type of prisoner or offence. However, the average cost per uncrowded prison place, defined as current expenditure per baseline Certified Normal Accommodation, is one of the Prison Service's Key Performance Indicators. The figures for the years 1992 to 1997, in cash terms, are:

1992–93: £22,723

1993–94: £23,080

1994–95: £23,391

1995–96: £24,178

1996–97: £24,271.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of *(a)* men and *(b)* women convicted of (i) defaulting on a fine and (ii) non-criminal offences, excluding fine defaulting, were given custodial sentences in each year from 1992 to 1997. [50397]

Ms Quin: The available information is for the number of fine defaulters and non-criminal prisoners received into prisons. The table shows information for the years 1992 to 1997. Information on the total number of persons who default on the payment of a fine, and hence the proportion of those who are imprisoned, is not recorded centrally. It

is also not recorded centrally what other orders are made in the circumstances in which persons are committed to prison as civil prisoners.

Receptions into prison: fine defaulters and non-criminals, by gender, 1992–97

	Fine defaulters		*Non-criminals*	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
1992	18,782	1,044	2,968	141
1993	21,097	1,306	4,756	317
1994	21,015	1,454	4,217	290
1995	18,787	1,370	3,611	178
1996	8,094	461	2,994	134
1997[1]	5,964	372	3,063	141

[1] Provisional

Youth Justice Board

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) of 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *142*, regarding the Chairman of the Youth Justice Board, if he will list the *(a)* legal qualifications and *(b)* experience of working with victims of crime of the successful candidate for Chairman of the Youth Justice Board; [50416]

(2) what assessment he made of the advantages and disadvantages of requiring political independence on the part of the Chairman of the Youth Justice Board. [50380]

Mr. Straw: The competition for Chair of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales was conducted in line with guidance from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments ('Nolan' procedures).

The Information for Applicants for the Chair and Board Members of the Youth Justice Board describes the role of the Chair and sets out the following essential experience:

Knowledge of the youth justice system;

Senior management experience, including strategic and/or resource management at senior level; and

Experience of working with Government.

It also states:

'Members of the board must include individuals who appear to the Home Secretary to have knowledge of the youth justice system. It will be desirable for Members of the Board between them to have experience of the following services: business; child and adolescent mental health services; courts dealing with young offenders; education services; legal services; police; probation; secure facilities for young people; social services; services for victims and young people.'

'Members will need to be objective and open-minded, able to act in an independent capacity and to deal with gender and race issues in a criminal justice context. They will need to be able to work effectively with providers of services for young people in the youth justice system. They will not be expected to represent particular professional associations or viewpoints.'

I am glad to say that the selection panels for the Youth Justice Board are at pains to ensure that all qualified candidates for appointment as Member (including the Chair) have the necessary impartiality for their task and fully meet the requirements for their posts specified above.

The Chair-designate is not a qualified lawyer, and has not worked directly with victims of crime (although he has played a significant role advising on the Government's policies for supporting victims).

Harassment

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been prosecuted under section 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997; how many prosecutions have resulted in a conviction; and if he will make a statement. [50429]

Mr. Michael: Section 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997—Putting people in fear of violence—came into force on 16 June 1997.

Provisional court proceedings data for 1997 show 243 prosecutions under section 4 of the Act, which resulted in 76 convictions. In addition, 51 cautions have been recorded provisionally for the offence.

Non-custodial Sentences

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons' statement to the Home Affairs Committee concerning the proportion of women prisoners and of young and adult prisoners who could be better dealt with through non-custodial sentences; and if he will make a statement. [50619]

Mr. Michael: We are aware of no evidence to support the contention that 30 per cent. of prisoners should "self-evidently not be in prison".

Evidence could only be obtained by detailed case by case analysis by experienced sentencers. Statistically, it would require over half of the offenders convicted of non-sexual or violent offences currently in prison to be given non-custodial sentences instead (including burglars, drug offenders and persistent offenders).

The Government are anxious to ensure that prison is used only when necessary and appropriate, so we are taking a range of measures to ensure that this is the case. In the Crime and Disorder Bill [*Lords*], we are introducing tough new community penalties for drug misusers and juvenile offenders, including the drug treatment and testing order, the action plan order and the reparation order. We are also keen to make greater use of modern technology and we have recently extended the areas where curfew orders can be enforced by electronic monitoring. Provisions in the Crime and Disorder Bill will also enable short-term prisoners to be released early on home detention curfew.

Similarly, the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 contains provisions allowing courts to impose community service orders or curfew orders on fine defaulters and persistent petty offenders and to impose driving disqualifications for non-motoring offences and fine default. These provisions are being introduced initially through pilot schemes in Norfolk and Manchester which began in January. The Act also widens the power to impose attendance centre orders on fine defaulters to include 21–24 year olds.

Reconviction Rates

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistics his Department collates on re-offending rates among offenders sentenced to fines; and if he will make a statement. [50598]

Mr. Michael: Reconviction rates within two years of sentence are calculated from time to time for all court disposals relating to standard list offences (all indictable and some more serious summary offences). This is done by extracting sample criminal career information from data held on the Home Office Offenders Index. Two figures are usually produced: the actual reconviction rates; and those predicted by taking into account a range of offender characteristics (such as age, gender, criminal history and current offence). These rates are not routinely published, but estimated figures for those fined are given in the table:

Reconviction rates within two years of sentence for offenders fined for standard list offences

	1987	*1991*	*1993*	*1994*
Reconviction rate[1]	30	37	47	45
Predicted rate	40	42	49	46
Number sampled	2,698	7,605	7,218	6,275

[1] A change in coverage slightly increased the reconviction rate for those sentenced in 1994

There are difficulties in comparing reconviction rates for 1993 and 1994 with those for earlier years, in that the sentencing structure was altered by the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (implemented on 1 October 1992). A unit fine scheme operated up until 20 September 1993. A large part of the increase in the reconviction rate between 1991 and 1993 can be accounted for by changes in predicted rates (the reconviction rate increases by 10 percentage points and the predicted rate increases by 7 percentage points).

It should be borne in mind that the figures quoted relate only to those fined for standard list offences. They do not necessarily reflect the reoffending behaviour of the many offenders who are fined for offences not on the standard list.

Police Staffing

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of the extra funding from his Department for the police in each of the last three years was allocated to police recruitment and staff expenditure in each police force; and if he will make a statement; [50600]

(2) if validated figures for the number of police officers per police force in England and Wales on 31 March are available. [50603]

Mr. Michael: Information on the number of police officers per police force on 31 March 1998 is contained in the table. It is not known what proportion of the additional £100 million provided by the Government to police forces over the years 1996/97 to 1998/99 has been used for police recruitment and staff expenditure. It is for individual chief constables to determine the number of police officers in their force area, within the total resources available to them. The table shows the changes in police numbers since 31 March 1996.

One of the mistakes of the last Government was to promise increases in police numbers. In the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, they handed to chief constables the freedom to decide whether to use available resources on employing police officers or on other expenditure, such as information technology. We attached no condition to the extra £40 million we provided to the police in England and Wales in 1998/99.

Police Manpower

	31 March 1996	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 1998*
Avon and Somerset	2,981.0	2,988.8	2,975.9
Bedfordshire	1,127.7	1,093.6	1,078.5
Cambridgeshire	1,238.1	1,302.0	1,291.4
Cheshire	1,997.9	2,045.5	2,035.9
City of London	869.5	858.9	824.9
Cleveland	1,420.3	1,459.3	1,483.4
Cumbria	1,115.0	1,143.5	1,163.5
Derbyshire	1,763.1	1,790.6	1,772.2
Devon and Cornwall	2,898.9	2,864.5	2,961.5
Dorset	1,263.0	1,284.0	1,310.0
Durham	1,401.0	1,460.5	1,514.8
Dyfed-Powys	991.0	1,004.5	1,002.3
Essex	2,884.3	2,960.7	2,928.5
Gloucestershire	1,132.7	1,132.6	1,103.9
Greater Manchester	6,938.0	6,921.6	6,948.7
Gwent	1,043.5	1,243.0	1,232.8
Hampshire	3,347.1	3,451.7	3,489.5
Hertfordshire	1,712.0	1,759.1	1,739.9
Humberside	2,041.0	2,045.0	2,021.2
Kent	3,120.1	3,260.1	3,251.8
Lancashire	3,171.0	3,247.5	3,257.1
Leicestershire	1,908.3	1,948.8	1,983.1
Lincolnshire	1,144.6	1,196.4	1,191.1
Merseyside	4,411.0	4,230.4	4,217.4
Metropolitan Police	27,343.0	26,677.3	26,192.7
Norfolk	1,401.0	1,431.6	1,429.6
Northamptonshire	1,152.5	1,176.7	1,168.7
Northumbria	3,668.3	3,676.8	3,766.7
North Wales	1,377.5	1,369.0	1,396.0
North Yorkshire	1,324.4	1,337.6	1,367.2
Nottinghamshire	2,317.7	2,323.4	2,322.6
South Wales	3,027.0	2,975.9	2,986.2
South Yorkshire	3,073.1	3,158.7	3,182.0
Staffordshire	2,208.8	2,211.1	2,292.1
Suffolk	1,137.8	1,179.7	1,185.8
Surrey	1,643.8	1,619.5	1,608.4
Sussex	3,073.5	3,084.9	3,037.7
Thames Valley	3,674.0	3,695.0	3,775.5
Warwickshire	979.0	925.9	924.1
West Mercia	2,016.8	2,040.2	2,011.8
West Midlands	7,145.1	7,112.7	7,156.5
West Yorkshire	5,142.0	5,208.8	5,154.7
Wiltshire	1,218.5	1,154.3	1,148.3
Total	124,843.9	125,051.7	124,885.9

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of police officers per head of population, (i) per police force and (ii) in total for the last date for which figures are available and in each of the three preceding years. [50597]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is set out in the table.

The population figures are those provided by the Office for National Statistics. For 1997–98, the population figures used are the same as for 1996–97 (mid 1996); mid 1997 population figures will not be available until later this year.

Head of population per police officer by police force area

Police force	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*[1]
Avon and Somerset	486	491	491	493
Bedfordshire	482	484	502	509
Cambridgeshire	545	560	540	545
Cheshire	505	490	479	481
City of London	6	6	6	6
Cleveland	390	394	382	376
Cumbria	420	440	429	422
Derbyshire	531	543	537	543
Devon and Cornwall	533	532	539	521
Dorset	523	537	531	521
Durham	449	434	416	401
Dyfed-Powys	485	478	475	476
Essex	513	522	511	517
Gloucestershire	472	488	491	504
Greater Manchester	366	372	372	371
Gwent	454	434	447	451
Hampshire	531	520	508	502
Hertfordshire	501	501	491	496
Humberside	438	436	434	439
Kent	496	497	478	479
Lancashire	443	450	439	437
Leicestershire	499	484	476	468
Lincolnshire	505	535	515	517
Merseyside	308	324	336	337
Metropolitan Police	271	274	284	289
Norfolk	551	551	543	543
Northamptonshire	515	520	514	517
Northumbria	400	392	390	381
North Wales	481	478	479	470
North Yorkshire	559	552	549	537
Nottinghamshire	445	445	444	444
South Wales	441	440	414	413
South Yorkshire	429	424	413	410
Staffordshire	473	478	477	461
Suffolk	545	577	561	558
Surrey	460	472	480	483
Sussex	494	476	477	485
Thames Valley	524	557	559	547
Warwickshire	490	509	541	542
West Mercia	546	552	548	556
West Midlands	374	369	372	369
West Yorkshire	417	410	405	409
Wiltshire	465	485	514	517
Total	412	415	416	416

[1] Based on provisional police strength figures as at 31 March 1998

Street Robberies

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure better co-operation between the Metropolitan Police and the British Transport Police to reduce the number of robberies occurring in the vicinity of underground and railway stations and to reduce the means of escape they offer to criminals. [50578]

Mr. Michael: The deployment of staff and use of resources are operational decisions for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the Chief Constable of the British Transport Police. The Commissioner has confirmed to me that the Metropolitan Police and British Transport Police have a close working relationship. They co-operate and share information, and in relation to street robbery they work together in partnership under the banner of Operation "Eagle Eye".

Operation "Eagle Eye" is an initiative set up specifically to tackle street robbery through the collection and analysis of information about crimes and known offenders, together with sophisticated policing techniques to arrest street robbers. The Commissioner tells me that this initiative has led to a 5 per cent. fall in the number of robbery offences recorded in the year to March 1998.

Firearms

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the international bodies or groups as members of which the Government have taken part in discussions on firearms matters since May 1997; and if he will indicate the topics discussed; [50540]

(2) if he will list the non-Governmental organisations invited by him to take part in international discussions on firearms matters. [50539]

Mr. Michael: On 26 June 1997, the Council of Ministers of the European Union adopted the European Union programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms. The Government have also taken part in discussions within the United Nations Crime Commission, which adopted a Resolution in April entitled: "Measures to regulate firearms for the purpose of combating illicit trafficking in firearms". Additionally, a statement of principles and action plan to combat illegal manufacturing and trafficking of firearms was drawn up by a Sub-Group of the G8 Lyon Group on Transnational Organised Crime and endorsed at the Birmingham Summit in May. The United Nations Small Arms Panel has considered ways to prevent and combat the accumulation of small arms to help avoid the destabilisation of countries engaged in conflict.

No non-governmental organisations have been invited to take part in these discussions.

Charities

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the letter of 11 May 1998 from the hon. Member for Aylesbury concerning the status of charities. [50616]

Mr. Michael: I replied to the hon. Member on 26 June. I will send the hon. Member a copy of my reply.

Magistrates

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to extend the training of lay magistrates prior to their sitting on the bench. [49875]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

By statute the responsibility for organising and delivering training to meet these requirements rests with individual Magistrates' Courts Committees.

Under the present training arrangements magistrates are required to attend prescribed induction training for a total of 12 hours and undertake visits of observation to their own and another magistrates' court before they commence sitting.

New training arrangements are to be introduced over a twelve month period commencing in September 1998. Under these new arrangements magistrates will have to acquire and demonstrate through a process of appraisal, a range of identified competencies appropriate to the areas of work of the magistrates' court they are engaged in. Appraisal will be conducted by an experienced magistrate colleague, specially selected and suitably trained.

Newly appointed magistrates will receive some training in basic competencies and undertake visits of observation to their own and another magistrates' court before they commence sitting.

Training and development to achieve the competencies required for the adult court will continue through a process of attending courses and experience gained through sitting in court.

On appointment, new magistrates will be assigned an experienced magistrate colleague, specially selected and suitably trained, who will act as a mentor to them, to provide information, advice, support and guidance and help them identify and apply the learning related to the required competencies derived from the experience of sitting and to apply the learning obtained from attending courses to sitting in court.

A magistrate who fails to demonstrate the acquisition of the required competencies and, despite further training and development opportunities, shows no further progress towards attaining the competencies will be referred to the Local Advisory Committee who may then recommend to the Lord Chancellor that the magistrate be removed from sitting on the bench.

TREASURY

Personal Pensions

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the progress being made by firms in resolving their reviews of personal pensions. [51262]

Mrs. Liddell: On 17 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *208–10*, I published figures showing the progress being made in the period ending 31 May by the 41 firms I have been monitoring for the last year. The table shows the progress made in the period up to the end of June by 29 of the 41 firms. Most of these firms have continued to make good progress, and only 3 firms have resolved under 50 per cent. of their cases. These are networks of independent financial advisers, and were among the firms I met on 7 July.

When I met senior representatives of the 41 firms last summer, I challenged them to meet or to better the targets set for them by the regulators, and made clear to them that I would publish progress statistics collected from them monthly. In my oral statement to the House on 18 November 1997, *Official Report*, columns 155–63, I said that I would remove from this list the name of any firm once it had achieved its target for resolving priority cases.

The Personal Investment Authority (PIA) have informed me that information provided to them indicates that, consistent with the deadlines they were set, 12 firms appear to have made every proper effort to obtain investors' acceptance of offers of redress. The names of these 12 firms have therefore been removed from the list. The firms are AXA Equity & Law, Barclays Life, Britannic Assurance, Commercial Union, Godwins, Guardian, Lloyds TSB, Midland Bank, Norwich Union, Prudential, Royal and Sun Alliance and United Assurance.

I should emphasise, however, that this does not mean that their work is over. The regulators will continue to monitor firms to see that they follow through on offers of redress in a timely manner and establish the arrangements necessary to honour guarantees of pensions rights. Looking to the future, firms must also tackle the next phase of the review of personal pensions, which in general terms concerns the cases of people whose need for redress is less urgent. This second phase of the review was the subject of a consultation by the regulators ending in May this year, and they will shortly be announcing the way forward. I hope all firms will respond constructively.

Progress by pensions firms in resolving cases of personal pensions mis-selling in the period to the end of June 1998

	A	*B*	*C*	*D*	*E*	*F*	*G*	*H*
Under 50% of cases resolved								
DBS	1,965	400	392	101	291	165	8	34
Financial options	399	146	48	22	26	24	6	48
Burns Anderson	1,210	335	327	150	132	99	8	48
50–75% of cases resolved								
Gan	11,915	1,610	6,242	661	5,581	4,305	36	55
Countrywide	4,879	2,501	281	172	109	85	2	57
Abbey Life	17,544	4,768	6,904	1,096	5,808	5,158	29	63
Lincoln National	13,342	1,934	7,789	1,174	6,615	5,302	40	63
Windsor Life	9,582	3,505	3,060	299	2,761	2,258	24	63
London and Manchester	8,466	1,356	4,862	558	4,304	3,859	46	68
Hill Samuel	6,150	867	3,845	661	3,184	2,855	46	71
Colonial	8,495	2,724	4,094	474	3,620	2,918	34	72
Friends Provident	6,994	1,104	4,419	660	3,759	3,307	47	73
Canada Life	5,593	376	4,270	605	3,665	3,119	56	73
NatWest	15,208	4,647	7,631	1,108	6,523	5,479	36	74
Berkeley Independent	181	111	23	19	4	4	2	74
Standard Life	7,130	825	4,892	1,106	3,786	3,349	47	74

Progress by pensions firms in resolving cases of personal pensions mis-selling in the period to the end of June 1998

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Over 75% of cases resolved								
CIS	43,679	5,346	31,446	13,395	18,051	14,249	33	76
IFA Network	365	122	161	107	54	48	13	76
Sedgwick	16,597	8,673	4,348	1,665	2,683	2,417	15	77
Sun Life of Canada	28,038	11,730	12,386	2,380	10,006	8,508	30	81
Albany Life	2,970	666	2,107	195	1,912	1,537	52	81
Equitable Life	7,584	1,895	4,657	1,691	2,966	2,687	35	83
Allied Dunbar	19,385	4,133	13,413	3,687	9,726	8,246	43	83
M&E Network	319	175	108	28	77	65	20	84
Hogg Robinson	2,226	810	1,191	401	790	675	30	85
Legal & General	36,738	15,093	19,363	1,812	17,551	14,668	40	86
Pearl	47,125	3,956	39,500	5,633	33,867	31,548	67	87
Wesleyan	4,185	293	3,535	1,001	2,534	2,368	57	88
Royal London	12,971	1,140	11,694	1,521	10,173	9,569	74	94

A: cases identified as requiring review
B: of A, cases where investor was informed that information gained during assessment excluded cases from review
C: number of assessments completed
D: cases where the investor has been informed that no redress is due
E: cases where redress has been offered
F: cases where redress has been accepted
G: cases where redress has been accepted as a percentage of cases identified for review ((F/A)x100)
H: cases resolved, including exclusions, as a percentage of cases identified for review (((B+D+F)/A)x100)

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Court Transcripts

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will take steps to allow members of the public to view court transcripts without charge. [49754]

Mr. Hoon: Members of the public can, with the permission of the court, obtain from private contractors transcripts of hearings held in open court provided they do not involve sensitive issues, such as child abuse. However, transcribers are entitled to charge for this, or for copying the transcript if one has already been made. There are no plans to provide transcripts free of charge.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will take steps to ensure that copies of court transcripts are made available free of charge. [49753]

Mr. Hoon: There are no plans to provide copies of transcripts free of charge. The Court Service pays for transcripts required for appeal purposes. Only between 5–10 per cent. of cases are transcribed for the Court of Appeal at a cost of approximately £700,000 pa. The increased demand, if transcripts were made freely available, would not, in my judgment make the best use of taxpayers' money.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48670]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department has a 20 working day target for responding to correspondence from members of the public and monitors performance against this target. The average response time in 1997–98 was 15.7 working days for the Lord Chancellor's Department Headquarters and 13 working days for the Court Service Headquarters. Information on average response time for the courts and the Public Trust Office is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49836]

Mr. Hoon: The information is as follows:

(a) Hon. Members can e-mail the Lord Chancellor's Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit at: *mcu.lcd@gtnet.gov.uk*

(b) Members of the public can e-mail the Department at: *enquiries.lcdhq@gtnet.gov.uk.*

The Lord Chancellor's Department website (http//www.open.gov.uk/lcd) also provides a number of other e-mail addresses for more specific contacts, such as for responses to consultation papers. In addition, it is expected that the Lord Chancellor's Department will be linked to the Government Secure Intranet by the end of this year.

Magistrates

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the (i) ethnic and (ii) religious background of *(a)* lay magistrates, *(b)* stipendiary magistrates and *(c)* Recorders in (1) numerical and (2) percentage terms. [49953]

Mr. Hoon: The table sets out the figures for the number and percentage of lay magistrates, stipendiary magistrates, acting stipendiary magistrates and recorders of ethnic minority origin. The figures for lay magistrates are based on a survey (excluding the Duchy of Lancaster) conducted in 1997 to which 94% of lay magistrates responded. The figures for the other judicial office holders are believed to be correct but because candidates for judicial appointments were not asked for information

about their ethnic origin before October 1991, the data may be incomplete. Candidates are not asked to provide details of their religious background.

Post	Total	Of ethnic minority origin	Percentage
Lay magistrates	25,124	1,026	4.1
Stipendiary magistrates	88	2	2.3
Acting Stipendiary magistrates	114	4	3.5
Recorders	836	13	1.5

Court Waiting Times

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average length of time between charge and verdict for *(a)* all offenders and *(b)* young offenders, in each of the most recent five years for which records are available. [50065]

Mr. Hoon: The exact information requested is not available and could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost. The nearest information available is given in the table.

The majority of criminal cases are completed in magistrates' courts. From a survey of approximately 4,000 defendants (450 youth defendants) each year the average time from charge/summons to completion in the magistrates' courts is as follows:

	Sample size	Average time from charge/ summons to completion (weeks)
All defendants		
1993	4,435	15.2
1994	4,092	16
1995	4,161	16.8
1996	3,551	17
1997	3,704	17.2
Youth defendants		
1993	335	15.2
1994	415	16.2
1995	567	17.2
1996	447	17
1997	524	17

Cases in the Crown Court are committed there by the magistrates' courts. From a survey of approximately 4,000 defendants (200 youth defendants) each year, the average time from charge/summons to committal to the Crown Court is as follows:

	Sample size	Average time from charge/ summons to committal (weeks)
All defendants		
1993	4,431	14.5
1994	4,034	15
1995	3,836	15.2
1996	3,993	15.1
1997	4,450	15.8
Youth defendants		
1993	61	12.7
1994	122	15
1995	102	14.4
1996	140	14
1997	214	15.2

The average time from committal to the Crown Court to the start of the main hearing is as follows:

All defendants	Average time from date of committal to start of main hearing (weeks)
1993	12
1994	13.1
1995	16.1
1996	16.7
1997	16.2

Note:
This information includes all cases in the Crown Court, but is not available for youth defendants

Conditional Fees

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the responses to the consultation paper, "Access to Justice with Conditional Fees", and on the measures the Government proposes to take. [51371]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has today placed in the Libraries of both Houses a summary of the responses to the Consultation Paper. The Government remain committed to achieving the aims set out in the consultation paper of extending access to justice and beginning the process of refocusing legal aid to where it can do most good. The Lord Chancellor is grateful to all those who responded, all of whose comments have been carefully considered.

The Government have received wide support to extend conditional fees to all civil proceedings other than family cases and we are keen to proceed as quickly as possible. I have today laid a draft Order for the approval of the House to extend conditional fees to all proceedings not excluded by statute. The draft Order will be debated as soon as time can be found. For the longer term, the Government continue to believe the operation and fairness of conditional fees would be enhanced by making the success fee and insurance premium recoverable. We wish to consider this further before reaching any final decision but the Lord Chancellor is minded to seek the legislation to allow the success fees and insurance premiums to be recoverable as soon as possible.

Legal aid is in urgent need of reform and we shall begin the process of reform in a number of ways. First, we will ensure that assisted persons have access to suitably competent lawyers in medical negligence cases by using existing powers to direct clients towards specialist lawyers who hold franchise contracts with the Legal Aid Board. It will be a condition of holding a contract that the lawyers have shown themselves to be competent in this area of

law. The Lord Chancellor has asked the Legal Aid Board to press ahead with putting in place the necessary contracts. The Lord Chancellor wishes to see these contracts in place by January 1999. The Lord Chancellor has also directed them to establish a panel of lawyers of proven experience and expertise to whom preference would be given in awarding contracts for group actions and other related changes, as canvassed in the Board's consultation paper *When the Price is High* published in June 1997.

In addition, the Lord Chancellor has asked the Board to complete, by the end of 1999, not only the provision of civil advice and assistance exclusively through contracts, but also all family legal aid, including representation.

Finally, to achieve the maximum benefit from the money available, the Government are determined to ensure that legal aid is not spent in purchasing legal services where a suitable alternative exists. They believe that conditional fees provide a suitable alternative, particularly in a range of money claims. They recognise, however, that this alternative would be more attractive if the success fee and insurance premium were recoverable. For that reason the Government are considering how quickly to move to a position where the kinds of money claims described in the Consultation Paper, in particular personal injury claims, and financed principally by conditional fee agreements. The Government would like to be able to move this position by October 1999.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Arms Sales

13. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has for greater transparency regarding arms sales; and if she will make a statement. [49384]

Mrs. Roche: The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), said in a written reply on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*, that the Government are preparing a report on UK strategic export controls which will include an account of the moves we have made since 2 May 1997 towards a responsible UK and European arms export policy; which will list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted; and which will set out the value of defence exports to each country.

This reflects HMG's commitment to increase the transparency and accountability of the decisions on export licences for arms.

Millennium Compliance

14. **Mr. White:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what further measures her Department is taking to help businesses tackle the millennium bug. [49385]

Mrs. Beckett: An extra £18 million has been provided by the Government for the work of Action 2000 to help businesses deal with the Millennium Bug. Action 2000 has recently finalised its business plan for the new funding which will be published shortly. A major communication and public relations campaign was announced by Action 2000 yesterday and at the same time the current Action 2000 Campaign material which has been updated was relaunched. Action 2000 will undertake further and more detailed monitoring of the state of readiness of small and medium sized companies.

Insolvency Service

15. **Mr. Vaz:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the Insolvency Service. [49386]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Insolvency Service was created as an Executive Agency of the Department of Trade and Industry on 21 March 1990. Its Framework Document defines its status, role, responsibilities and accountability; and the structure within which its work is to be determined, its resources established and its performance assessed. It was last revised and laid before Parliament on 16 March 1998. Its annual report and audited accounts for 1997–98 are due to be laid before Parliament shortly. In February 1996, after an evaluation of The Service's performance against the private sector, it was decided not to contract out the case administration work of Official Receivers.

Post Office

16. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received on her review of the Post Office. [49388]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have met a wide range of interested parties, including the management and unions of the Post Office, leading private sector carriers and representative organisations. The review process is an inclusive one and since the announcement of the second stage of the Review on 6 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *63*, my officials have received written views and met interested parties.

23. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the future of the Post Office. [49395]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government plan to give the Post Office greater commercial freedom so that it can meet the challenges of domestic and international markets. The Government have commissioned a review of the public sector options for achieving this and we plan to present our proposals to Parliament in the Autumn.

Energy Review

17. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement about progress in respect of the proposals in the Government's review of energy. [49389]

Mr. Battle: On 25 June the Government published a consultation document setting out their proposals. The consultation period ends on 20 July 1998.

20. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to receive a report on the consultations regarding energy markets. [49392]

Mr. Battle: The consultation period on the Government's consultation document on their Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation finishes on 20 July. We expect to reach conclusions shortly thereafter.

Young Entrepreneurs

19. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement about her Department's role in assisting young entrepreneurs. [49391]

Mrs. Roche: The Department is keen to encourage young entrepreneurs. One of the Department's key aims is to foster an enterprising nation. The Department, and other Government departments, assists entrepreneurs through a wide range of activities and schemes, including locally delivered business advisory services.

Employment Rights and Trade Union Recognition

21. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to bring forward the proposed legislation on employment rights and trade union recognition. [49393]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I cannot, of course, anticipate the content of the Queen's Speech, but it is the Government's intention to introduce legislation on employment rights and trade union recognition as soon as possible.

Higher Technology Industries

22. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she is taking to address the shortfall of investment in innovation in higher technology industries. [49394]

Mr. Battle: The Government recognise that investment in innovation is key to our overall competitiveness. We have already taken steps to improve the regulatory climate for investors, to help high technology companies to improve their management and marketing skills, to improve the quality and quantity of financing opportunities and to encourage industry to draw on our excellent science and engineering base. For example, we have recently launched the University Challenge Fund to assist in the transformation of good research into good business. A copy of the scheme guidelines has been placed in the Library.

Foresight Programme

24. **Dr. Desmond Turner:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she is taking to raise the profile of the foresight programme. [49396]

Mr. Battle: The progress report I published last month outlined the steps which are being taken to raise the profile of the Foresight Programme within Government under the overall direction of the Ministerial Foresight Group. Copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses. A range of initiatives are in hand to raise its profile with business and academia. These include the current consultation on the next round which has produced a very positive response and expressions of interest in participation from organisations which have not been involved in Foresight to date.

EU Structural Funds

25. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what her objectives are for the reform of EU structural funds. [49397]

Mrs. Roche: We welcome the publication of the draft regulations for Structural and Cohesion Funds—which are part of the wider Agenda 2000 reform package.

Our overriding concern in the long negotiation ahead is to ensure that these draft regulations are affordable, durable and fair overall, particularly to the UK.

Energy Policy

26. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the role of state intervention in industry following her statement on energy policy. [49398]

Mr. Battle: The Government are committed to consumer protection promoting fair competition in open markets and putting consumers first. We will take action to the extent necessary to secure properly functioning markets and to protect consumers, as set out in our energy statement and in our Green Paper, A Fair Deal for Consumers: Modernising the Framework for Utility Regulation.

Plutonium

27. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the relative costs of eliminating Britain's plutonium stockpile through *(a)* the production of mixed oxide fuel and *(b)* vitrification. [49399]

Mr. Battle: It is for the owners of spent fuel and plutonium to assess the relative costs of MOX fuel production and vitrification. Subject to meeting the stringent safety, security and international safeguard requirements, it is for them to choose their preferred management options, including whether or not their spent fuel should be reprocessed and whether their plutonium is stored, manufactured into MOX fuel or vitrified.

30. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what her policy is in respect of the creation of plutonium from energy sources in the UK. [49402]

Mr. Battle: Nuclear generating stations in this country currently meet nearly 30 per cent. of our electricity needs. It is an inescapable fact that plutonium is produced when uranium is burnt in conventional nuclear reactors.

All civil plutonium in the UK is stored safely and securely under relevant national and international regulations.

University Research

28. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to improve the infrastructure and equipment for research at Britain's universities. [49400]

Mr. Battle: Earlier this week, on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *47–48*, my right hon. Friend announced the establishment of a £600 million capital fund for building new and refurbishing existing university laboratories, equipment and other essential infrastructure,

funded equally by the Government and the Wellcome Trust. £400 million has also been provided over the next three years for the Research Councils to meet the current and capital costs of new project funds in priority areas. Additional funding for research of £300 million over the next three years has been announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and a further £100 million by the Wellcome Trust towards the cost of a high intensity x-ray source for use mainly by university researchers.

The size of this package for research, which amounts in total to £1.4 billion over the life of this Parliament, will ensure that our universities have the facilities they require to remain at the forefront of research into the next millennium.

Science

29. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she has taken to promote the interests of UK science in Europe. [49401]

Mr. Battle: UK researchers are active in a wide range of scientific activities in Europe, through the European Union's framework programmes, through major European collaborations such as CERN and the European Space Agency, and through bilateral and multilateral collaborations between institutes, universities and individual researchers. At the level of the European Union, the Government have played a leading role in encouraging UK scientists to participate in the current, fourth, framework programme and in negotiating the fifth framework programme, currently under discussion.

UK scientists perform very strongly in these programmes, and are expected to continue to do so in the future. The Government also play a proactive role in respect of our membership of the major European collaborations, with a view to ensuring high quality, cost effective opportunities for UK scientists to work with others in these areas. And we are active, through maintaining close and constructive bilateral relations with other European countries, in ensuring that the UK is seen to be keen to create opportunities for mutually beneficial collaborative research partnerships at all levels.

We also consider that useful work can be done at the European level to promote the role of women in science. The UK actively supports the Commission's development of measures to encourage action on the under-representation of women in science. This parallels the activity of the Office of Science and Technology's Development Unit on women in science, engineering and technology. As part of the UK Presidency, I chaired the round table discussions during the European Commission Conference on Women and Science in April.

We have also been keen to encourage discussion at European level of key issues surrounding the development of new technologies, such as biotechnology. Among measures to encourage this the UK Presidency and European Commission jointly organised a Biotechnology Round Table in June which brought together representatives from the EU institutions, industry, research, consumer, environmental and other interest groups.

Science, Engineering and Technology

31. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the impact of the fifth framework research programme on the UK science, engineering and technology sectors. [49403]

Mr. Battle: The fifth framework programme is currently the subject of negotiation with other member States and with the European Parliament. The Council's common position, agreed unanimously during the UK Presidency in February 1998, envisages a programme which will be clearly focused on areas where research at a European level can be expected to make a contribution to increased competitiveness and improvements in quality of life. The aim is to agree the programme, which will run until the end of 2002, by the end of this year. I expect the UK science, engineering and technology sectors to participate strongly in this programme, as they have done in previous programmes.

EU Industry Council

32. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the work of the EU Industry Council during the UK presidency. [49404]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) on 21 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns *357–58*.

Human Genome Sequencing

33. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what share of the world's effort in human genome sequencing is being undertaken in the UK. [49405]

Mr. Battle: The UK is undertaking around one third of the world's effort in sequencing the human genome. The UK contribution is made primarily through the work of the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council.

The mapping programme is currently scheduled to be completed by 2005.

Loan Companies

34. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what new proposals she has to restrict the activities of loan companies charging excessive rates of interest. [49406]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Director General of Fair Trading is currently consulting on the extortionate credit provisions of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Before taking further action I will study the evidence this exercise produces and his proposals.

Minimum Wage

35. **Mrs. Heal:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what recent representations she has received about the implementation of the Government's proposals for a national minimum wage. [49407]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of recent representations about the implementation of our proposals for a national minimum wage, which we expect to be implemented by April 1999.

Business Practices

36. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps her Department is taking to promote innovation in business practices. [49408]

Mrs. Roche: The Department continues to work with a wide range of partners to help companies innovate by adopting better business practices.

As part of the Competitiveness UK programme, my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs has been chairing the Best Practice Working Party to discuss what further activities the Department should be supporting in this area.

Euro

37. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action her Department is taking to raise business awareness of the introduction of the euro. [49409]

Mrs. Beckett: The Euro Preparations Unit was set up in Treasury at the beginning of this year to raise awareness of the implications of EMU for UK businesses and to help them prepare for the strategic and practical changes that the introduction of the single currency on 1 January will bring.

My officials will continue to work closely with the EPU to ensure that the many business contacts that my Department has are used to best effect.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps her Department is taking to help small to medium-sized enterprises prepare for the introduction of a single currency. [49387]

Mrs. Roche: The Euro Preparations Unit was set up in H.M. Treasury, with secondees from DTI, at the beginning of this year to raise awareness of the implications of EMU for UK businesses and to help them prepare for the strategic and practical changes that the introduction of the single currency on 1 January will bring.

DTI officials will continue to work closely with the EPU to ensure that the many business contacts that the Department has are used to best effect. For instance, I recently discussed the implications of the euro with the Business Link Chief Executives and considered with them how they could help SMEs prepare.

Inward Investment

Mr. Evans: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many new jobs she estimates were created by inward investment into England in 1997–98. [49792]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* My Department's Invest in Britain Bureau announced yesterday that in 1997/98 the UK has had another successful year, attracting 618 inward investment decisions with 124,622 associated jobs, of which 45,937 were new jobs. Of these decisions 464 were to invest in England with 98,699 associated jobs, of which 29,778 were new jobs.

Ladbroke-Coral Merger

Mr. Meale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many representations the Monopolies and Mergers Commission has received about the proposed merger between Ladbroke and Coral; and if she will make a statement. [50149]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The Monopolies and Mergers Commission has received a large number of representations about the acquisition by Ladbroke of the Coral betting business, and I have asked the Chairman of the MMC to reply to my hon. Friend direct.

Mr. Meale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will direct the Monopolies and Mergers Commission to consider the adverse effects of the proposed merger between Ladbroke and Coral on national competition in the bookmaking industry. [50153]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: In announcing her decision to refer the acquisition by Ladbroke of the Coral betting business to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC), my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade stated that she considered that the acquisition raised competition concerns in relation to the off-course betting market.

It is for the MMC to consider whether a merger operates, or may be expected to operate, against the public interest. The Fair Trading Act 1973 requires the MMC, in considering whether any particular matter operates, or may be expected to operate, against the public interest, to take into account all matters which appear to them in the particular circumstances to be relevant, although they are required to have regard to certain specified public interest issues.

Mr. Meale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to receive the report of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission inquiry into the proposed merger between Ladbroke and Coral; and if she will make a statement. [50154]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: On 1 July, I announced that I had agreed to a request by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) for an extension to the time allowed for their inquiry into the acquisition by Ladbrokes of the Coral betting business. The MMC's report, which was originally due to be made by 7 July, is now due to be made within the period ending on 31 July.

Redundancy Payments (Scotland)

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the total cost in each of the last 10 years of *(a)* redundancy payments and *(b)* lump sum redundancy payments to people who were employed in the public sector in Scotland. [50652]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Retailers' Loyalty Cards

Mr. Barnes: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research she has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the impact of retailers' loyalty cards on consumer spending patterns and on prices. [50209]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* No research has been commissioned and no evaluations made by the Department on the impact of retailers' loyalty cards.

Telephone Services (Charges)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research she has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the costs incurred by consumers through the use of call-queueing and automated telephone-answering systems. [50208]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* Call-queueing and telephone-answering equipment has been introduced by companies and other organisations since the 1980s, with the aim of making their telephone-answering operations more efficient for themselves and their callers. Companies have a wide choice of switchboard equipment to choose from, and have responsibility for choosing equipment and setting it up so that their consumers' needs are met. Calls are legitimately charged to the calling party, but companies can set up their inquiry lines to run on Lo-call or even Freephone numbers, which will reduce or remove the cost to the consumer. No research has been commissioned or evaluated into the costs incurred by consumers through the use of call-queueing and automated telephone-answering machines, but the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel) is working with the telecommunications industry to ensure that switchboard recorded messages inform members of the public who ring that they are being held in a queue, where this is the case. Once informed of this, callers have the choice of continuing to wait in the queue, which may incur a cost, or of hanging up and trying again later.

Employment Tribunals Service

Dr. Starkey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects the Employment Tribunals Service to publish its annual report for 1997–98. [51370]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Employment Tribunals Service became an executive agency on 1 April 1997. Its annual report, covering its first year of operation, has been published today. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the range of maturity values at two years and 10 years after commencement of the pension plans of each approved personal pension plan provider; and what assessment she has made of variations of maturity values, and the reasons for them, under the pensions review. [47728]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 June 1998]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

£

Pension fund	*Maturity value with 2 years contributions*	*Maturity value with 10 years contributions*
Scheme 1	5,800	28,400
Scheme 2	5,200	26,200
Scheme 3	5,000	25,400
Scheme 4	4,400	22,300
Scheme 5	4,300	22,400
Scheme 6	4,100	21,000
Scheme 7	3,800	22,700
Scheme 8	3,600	23,400
Scheme 9	3,300	27,600
Scheme 10	2,800	20,300

Notes:

1. Amounts have been rounded to the nearest £100
2. The table shows maturity values upon retirement at age 65 of ten modelled Appropriate Personal Pension (APP) funds and are based on the characteristics of actual providers
3. They are based on an individual who contracts-out of SERPS at the age of 30 at the beginning of the 1997/98 financial year for 2 and 10 years with all National Insurance rebates accrued during this time being paid into the APP
4. Fund values are expressed in constant 1997 prices
5. The following assumptions have been made:

(a) that the National Insurance rebates, and associated tax relief, paid over the 2 and 10 year periods are the only contributions ever made;

(b) that the individual was earning the national average level of full-time earnings in Great Britain at the time the APP commenced in April 1997;

(c) that earnings increase at a rate of 1.5 per cent. a year above inflation;

(d) that the rate of return on the pension fund assets (before charges are deducted) is 4.5 per cent. a year above inflation;

(e) that National Insurance rebates are paid into the pension fund halfway through the following tax year in which the earnings to which they relate were accrued;

(f) that the retirement age of 65 is also the retirement age specified in the personal pension policy (penalties may be incurred if an individual retires before a specified scheme retirement age); and

(g) that the sample funds accrue the same rate of return on fund assets before charges are deducted

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the present weekly value of the basic pension for a single person and a married couple had it been increased in line with earnings since 1980. [50863]

Mr. Denham: If the basic State Retirement Pension had been increased by the higher of earnings or prices since 1980, the weekly rate would now be £89.60 for a single pensioner and £143.40 for a married couple.

Notes:

1. The Retail Price Index (RPI) (All items) and the Average Earnings Index (Whole Economy) as supplied by The Office for National Statistics were used in this calculation.
2. The figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating.
3. The rate of basic Retirement Pension was increased in the April 1994 uprating by 50 pence for a single pensioner and 70 pence for a couple on account of VAT on fuel. This increase has not been added in to these illustrative figures.
4. For the calculation where State Retirement Pension was linked to the higher of RPI and earnings, the earnings index was the higher figure except in 1982, 1984, 1991 and 1996, when the RPI was used.

Housing Benefit Overpayments

Mr. Roy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will publish for each Scottish local authority, a breakdown for 1996–97, of housing benefit overpayments, in terms of *(a)* numbers, *(b)* amounts for DSS, local authority and claimant errors and *(c)* (b) expressed as a percentage of total expenditure. [48500]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information available is set out in the table.

Overpayments of Housing Benefit Expenditure, Scotland—1996–97

	Housing benefit expenditure £	DSS/DfEE error			Local authority error			All other overpayments (including fraud)		
	(a)	Numbers	(b) Amount £	(b) as a percentage of (a)	Numbers	(c) Amount £	(c) as a percentage of (a)	Numbers	(d) Amount £	(d) as a percentage of (a)
Aberdeen	23,923,000	12	1,071	[2]—	111	6,885	[2]—	5,271	1,008,285	4.2
Aberdeenshire[1]	16,229,000	4	2,180	[2]—	112	183,990	1.1	1,031	382,753	2.4
Angus	10,410,000	5	1,247	[2]—	11	1,345	[2]—	164	99,439	0.9
Argyllbute	13,120,000	23	3,265	[2]—	1	151	[2]—	1,576	389,837	2.9
Clackmannanshire	6,975,000	0	0	n/a	100	1,180	[2]—	1,540	211,121	3.0
Dumfries Galloway	21,479,000	17	2,326	[2]—	59	4,073	[2]—	2,620	483,680	2.2
Dundee	42,262,000	0	0	n/a	3	1,419	[2]—	4,968	1,174,883	2.8
East Ayrshire[1]	18,531,000	5	1,289	[2]—	70	9,721	[2]—	2,252	364,728	2.0
East Dunbartonshire	7,670,000	3	302	[2]—	16	2,329	[2]—	549	125,239	1.6
East Lothian	12,222,000	0	0	n/a	56	8,476	[2]—	1,100	258,682	2.1
East Renfrewshire[1]	6,204,000	13	584	[2]—	35	6,920	0.1	182	70,394	1.1
Edinburgh[1]	98,891,000	0	0	[2]—	10	1,114	[2]—	25,282	3,030,866	3.0
Falkirk[1]	19,361,000	0	0	[2]—	5,414	189,433	1.0	7,990	719,999	3.7
Fife	51,687,000	0	0	[2]—	88	24,967	[2]—	11,768	1,314,306	2.5
Glasgow	238,035,000	0	0	[2]—	369	112,659	[2]—	29,664	9,455,184	3.0
Highland[1]	29,074,000	2	561	[2]—	22	4,624	[2]—	4,902	749,955	2.6
Inverclyde	17,528,000	0	0	n/a	33	7,507	[2]—	1,025	220,332	1.3
Midlothian	8,957,000	5	3,104	[2]—	519	52,670	0.6	1,481	353,626	3.9
Moray	8,799,000	1	117	[2]—	498	28,019	0.3	2,961	383,055	4.3
North Ayrshire[1]	22,770,000	6	307	[2]—	3	1,503	[2]—	1,938	318,969	1.4
North Lanarkshire[1]	56,676,000	11	2,647	[2]—	965	76,804	0.1	12,892	1,146,921	2.0
Orkney	1,948,000	0	0	n/a	73	1,850	[2]—	255	69,957	3.6
Perth and Kinross	13,743,000	1	408	[2]—	16	3,562	[2]—	580	429,565	3.1
Renfrewshire	30,324,000	11	1,897	[2]—	178	7,530	[2]—	2,743	480,507	1.6
Scottish Borders	11,704,000	3	378	[2]—	0	0	n/a	1,310	351,937	3.0
Shetland	1,815,000	1	106	[2]—	4	682	[2]—	1,552	80,869	4.5
South Ayrshire	18,264,000	10	337	[2]—	176	22,415	0.1	493	226,727	1.2
South Lanarkshire[1]	48,608,000	0	0	n/a	312	8,870	[2]—	7,824	582,942	1.2
Stirling	12,104,000	0	0	n/a	17	1,345	[2]—	2,733	394,626	3.3
West Dunbartonshire	19,891,000	2	316	[2]—	345	8,023	[2]—	2,539	415,667	2.1
West Lothian	19,675,000	0	0	n/a	23	51,130	0.3	2,826	447,431	2.3
Western Isles	3,160,000	0	0	n/a	117	3,458	0.1	595	75,558	2.4

[1] Non audited returns
[2] Percentage less than 0.1
Note:
n/a = Not applicable
Source:
DSS Planning and Finance Division

Benefits Agency (Complaints)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to her answer of 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *625*, what was the ratio of complaints in the period 1 October 1997 to 31 March 1998 received by the Benefits Agency districts with London offices to *(a)* the total claimant count at each office and *(b)* the total population within each district. [49728]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Andrew Love, dated 15 July 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question pursuant to her Answer of 25th June, Official Report, column 625, what is the ratio of complaints in the period 1st October 1997 to 31st March 1998 received by the Benefits Agency (BA) districts with London offices to (a) the total claimant count at each office and (b) the total population within each district.

The information requested is not available.

It is not possible to provide a total customer count. The customer load figures collated by each BA office represent the number of people receiving a particular benefit. These figures do not reflect that one customer may be receiving more than one benefit and therefore may be counted more than once. There are also customers in receipt of benefits who will not be captured in the load figures, for example those in receipt of Retirement Pension are only counted on a national basis.

The total population count for each BA district is not available.

I am sorry that I have been unable to provide more specific information.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to equalise the rate of housing benefit for all tenures. [50053]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We have no plans to introduce a single rate of Housing Benefit across all tenures. The current system is based on tenants' actual rents. Housing Benefit can cover up to the full reasonable rent for tenants on low incomes in every tenure.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will assess the advantages of extending the period in which the NHB-1-EP form has to be completed and returned for the applicant to qualify for the extended payment to be awarded. [50381]

Mr. Keith Bradley: As the Welfare Reform Green Paper makes clear, we are currently looking at a range of proposals for improving the work incentives offered by Housing Benefit. We are examining a number of ways of improving the way in which people receive support with their housing both during the transition into work and once in work. Working families tax credit and Housing Benefit together will improve the financial position of many people in work. It is vital that all welfare support, including Housing Benefit for people in work, is accessible, understandable and delivered in an efficient manner.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for a housing benefit extended payment were made in the last year; and how many were successful. [50373]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is set out in the table.

Housing benefit extended payments—Great Britain 1997

Provisional	*Number*
Total extended payment applications	163,000
Total successful applications	140,000
Percentage of successful applications	85

Notes:
1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand
2. Figures refer to a benefit unit which may be a single person or a couple

Source:
Local Authority Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit quarterly Administration data returns January 1997 to December 1997

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what monitoring her Department conducts to establish the degree of slippage between the number of NHB-1-EP application forms *(a)* issued and *(b)* returned. [50382]

Mr. Keith Bradley: There are no records kept of the numbers of extended payment application forms (NHB1EP) issued to potential applicants. The forms are readily available at local Benefits Agency offices, Employment Services' Jobcentres and some local authority offices.

Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households in Cheltenham have been affected by the restriction of council tax benefit on properties in Band F and above. [50052]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information requested is not available.

Rented Housing Debt

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the level of debt owed to landlords whose rent is *(a)* paid direct by district council housing benefit departments and *(b)* paid by housing benefit claimants. [50410]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Information is not available in the format requested.

Housing Benefit is paid to the landlord only in specified circumstances that are prescribed by regulations. For example, benefit must normally be paid direct to the landlord where the claimant is in arrears of an amount equivalent to eight weeks or more of the amount he is liable to pay his landlord as rent. Local authorities can also choose to make direct payments where they consider it would be in the best interests of the claimant to do so.

The present regulations, give consideration to the personal responsibility of the tenant and the legitimate interests of landlords and the taxpayers in keeping rent arrears in check. However, it is the landlord's own responsibility to ensure that he obtains whatever payments are properly due to him, irrespective of the tenant's source of income.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if she will list the activities undertaken by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), in his capacity as the Green Minister for Social Security since his appointment; [50032]

(2) what measures are being taken to raise awareness of sustainable environmental issues within her Department; and what specific training is available to staff; [50030]

(3) what percentage of her Department's waste is recycled at present; and what targets she has set for increasing recycling in the future. [50031]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* In my capacity as Green Minister I have attended meetings of Green Ministers and encouraged the initiative when many staff cycled to work on 10 June 1998. My priority this year has been the development of Green Commuting Plans within the Department. I launched this initiative on 17 February 1998 at a Departmental conference on Sustainable Development and "Greening the DSS". 21 senior representatives of the various Departmental Business Units attended that meeting.

Their commitment to the Green Agenda has led to further Departmental conferences for policy and operational senior and middle managers in all Departmental business units. Following these conferences the Department is committed to producing a minimum of 20 "Green Commuting Plans" to be introduced by March 1999 with the appointment of a similar number of local co-ordinators to ensure success.

In addition there is the commitment to education, training and motivating staff and contractors to work in an environmentally responsible manner and to play a full part in developing new ideas and initiatives. This includes communicating openly about environmental policies and best practice (including best available scientific advice) and co-operating with others in the public and private sectors at home and abroad to develop and promote environmentally sound policies.

A portfolio of relevant training courses is currently being compiled and as the Government's new sustainable development strategy is developed Green Ministers will be considering staff awareness alongside options for more formal training.

The setting of targets for recycled waste in the Department was not previously an option because of the fragmented nature of its estate management. The appointment of PPM, the private sector consortium who provide building services including waste management, to the entire Departmental estate has now made this possible.

The Department's current guide "Green Guide", used locally throughout the estate, includes guidance on the recycling of paper, drinks cans, glass, plastic, print toner cartridges and batteries. There are contacts in each Business Unit/Agency for the promotion of green issues.

A benchmarking exercise to baseline current volumes and costs was completed earlier this year and the results are being used in the revision of the Departments "Green Guide" which is currently underway. PPM will work with the Department to implement its "Green" policies.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate she has made of the number of winter fuel payments sent to local post offices for distribution and returned as unclaimed to the department; [50011]

(2) what estimate she has made of the number of winter fuel payments remaining outstanding and unpaid at 30 June. [50010]

Mr. Denham: Winter Fuel payments are one of a number of initiatives the Government have taken to help vulnerable people, especially the elderly, keep warm in the winter. A total of £400 million has been committed for two years (1997–98 and 1998–99), to help pensioners with fuel bills to pay. This is the first time any Government have provided additional help with heating costs to all pensioners living in the United Kingdom who receive a retirement pension or one of a number of other qualifying benefits.

The making of this year's payments has been an enormous and unprecedented exercise. In order to establish all eligible pensioners, correctly identify pensioner households, and determine the amount each should receive, it was necessary to correlate data. This involved 15 million computer records, covering 15 qualifying benefits, across nine computer systems. Overall, almost ten million pensioners, in over seven million households, have received a payment.

The administration of Winter Fuel payments is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Roger Gale, dated 14 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what estimate she has made of the number of winter fuel payments sent to local Post Offices for distribution and returned as unclaimed to the Department and how many remain outstanding and unpaid at 30th June 1998.

Around 5 million pensioners paid by order book had to collect their winter fuel payment girocheque at the Post Office when they called to collect their normal weekly pension payment. We have estimated that around 107,000 (2 per cent. of the volume issued) were not collected and were returned to the nearest Benefits Agency (BA) office.

The vast majority of all eligible pensioners should now have received their winter fuel payments, with the exception of a small number where BA is having difficulties ascertaining the reason for non-collection at the Post Office. Where someone has not received a payment, but is expecting one, they should contact the office which normally deals with their pension or benefit.

Thank you for the opportunity to explain the position.

Public Appointments (Women)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will publish the representations made by the Minister for Women to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on women in public appointments prior to publication of his recent report, "Quangos: Opening the Doors". [50856]

Ms Ruddock: It is not practice to disclose internal discussions between Ministerial colleagues.

One of the main priorities of the Ministers for Women is to increase the representation of women at all levels and in all areas. The Government have agreed in principle a ratio of 50:50 women and men for public appointments and a pro-rata representation of the ethnic minorities. This commitment was made public in 'Quangos: Opening Up Public Appointments', published 29 June.

This is a great step forward and we look forward to working with colleagues to ensure that the goal of 50:50 representation is reached.

Part-time Working Directive

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment the Women's Unit has made of the impact of the implementation of the Part-Time Working Directive on the number of part-time jobs in the UK. [50859]

Ms Ruddock: The Government are keen to promote family-friendly employment policies and the implementation of the Part-time Work Directive will be an important step forward. Many women choose to work part-time in order to balance their work and family responsibilities and this Directive will be particularly important to them as it will remove discrimination and increase the status of part-time work.

We do not consider that implementation of the Directive will result in a loss of jobs; on the contrary, the view of the Government, employers and workers themselves is that it will eliminate obstacles to part-time work and increase opportunities for those wishing to work part-time.

We will be carrying out detailed research into the impact of the proposals and expect to receive the findings later in the year.

Women's Unit

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many officials work in the women's unit of her Department. [50875]

Ms Ruddock: As at 13 July 1998, 35 officials work in the Women's Unit of the Department of Social Security. Seven of these staff are part-time workers. The total hours worked are equivalent to 33.4 full time staff.

Maintenance Disregard

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the cost of increasing the amount of maintenance disregarded for family credit, disability working allowance, housing benefit and council tax benefit purposes to *(a)* £20 and *(b)* £25 per week. [50887]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is set out in the table.

Benefit cost of increasing the maintenance disregard

£m per annum

Benefit	*£20 disregard*	*£25 disregard*
Family Credit	15	35
Housing Benefit	5	5
Council Tax Benefit	*	5
Disability Working Allowance	*	*
Total	25	45

Notes:

1. Modelled on the benefit rules and benefit rates as in November 1998
2. Modelled using data taken from the 1996–97 Family Resources Survey and November 1997 Family Credit 5 per cent. sample, uprated to 1998–99 prices, benefits and earnings levels
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest £5 million and may not sum to the total because of rounding. * denotes a cost of less than £2.5 million
4. Assumes that the recorded maintenance payments on the Family Credit datasets are paid at the same level each week
5. Excludes the financial impact of behavioural changes caused by the new disregard levels

SCOTLAND

Mathematics

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to implement the recommendations concerning better contact between schools, examining bodies, the inspectorate and professional mathematicians contained in the 1995 report, "Tackling the Mathematics Problem". [48836]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* The report to which the hon. Member refers concerns England and Wales only. It was not submitted to the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department for a formal response.

In Scotland there are already good relations encompassing higher education involvement in educational decision making at school level.

My department is already taking action to respond to general concerns raised by this report where relevant in Scotland—for example the numerical and algebraic competence of university entrants. HM Inspectors of Schools published in 1997 the report "Improving Mathematics Education 5–14" which proposed earlier introduction of algebra in schools and advised that more attention should be paid to mental calculation and that non-calculator papers be introduced into national examinations—a proposal now out for consultation by the SQA. Scottish Certificate of Education examinations have, as a result, been putting more emphasis on algebraic manipulation so as to encourage schools to improve pupils' skills. The development of new Higher Still courses has taken these points into account and numeracy is a core skill in all proposed Scottish Group Awards.

Chemistry and Biochemistry Curriculum

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the effectiveness of the higher chemistry curriculum and exam in preparing students for degree courses in chemistry and biochemistry. [48743]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* No such research has been commissioned or evaluated by The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department. The content of the Higher Chemistry course was, however, reviewed during the development of the new Higher Still courses in Chemistry, which will be introduced into schools and colleges in Scotland in 1999.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48642]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the savings from abolishing the assisted places scheme in the years *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [48466]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The estimated savings from phasing out the assisted places scheme are not less than £3.84 million in 1998–99 financial year and £4.23 million in 1999–2000 financial year.

Language Examinations

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which languages other than English may be offered for examination in Standard Grade, Highers and Advanced Highers as proposed. [49870]

Mr. Wilson: Examinations in French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Latin and Classical Greek are currently available at Standard Grade, Higher Grade and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS). Separate examinations in Gaelic for native speakers (Gàidhlig) and learners are currently available at Standard Grade and Higher Grade. Gàidhlig is also offered at CSYS. A Standard Grade examination in Urdu was set for the first time this year.

Following the introduction of Higher Still in 1999, examinations in French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Latin, Classical Greek, Gaelic and Gàidhlig will be available at Standard Grade and at Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher. A coherent group of units at Access 3 will also be available in all of these languages with the exceptions of Latin and Classical Greek.

Tourism

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will ensure that the Scottish Tourist Board helps to promote sustainable development and biodiversity in Scotland; [49742]

(2) what plans he has to include environmental duties and a commitment to sustainable development in the remit of the Scottish Tourist Board. [49743]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are committed to the principle of environmentally sustainable tourism. Our policy is to promote Scotland as an environmentally sound destination. The Scottish Tourist Board (STB), on the Government's behalf, is a major player in the Tourism and the Environment Task Force. The Board supports all of the Task Force's activities which are designed to increase environmental awareness throughout the tourism industry and to promote environmentally sensitive tourism development. STB has recently developed and launched a "Green Tourism Business Scheme" which aims to enable businesses working in the hospitality sector to address their environmental responsibilities.

Birds of Prey

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what licences have been issued over the past year for the killing of *(a)* peregrines and *(b)* sparrowhawks; and for what reasons they were issued. [50454]

Mr. Macdonald: No licences have been issued.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

World Citizenship

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding his Department has given to the Council for Education in World Citizenship in each of the last five years. [48765]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department has provided funding of £360,000 over the period 1993–94 to 1997–98 as follows:

	£
1993–94	92,000
1994–95	84,000
1995–96	85,000
1996–97	60,000
1997–98	39,000

We are currently developing proposals for new funding arrangements to support organisations working in the field of education for citizenship which move away from core funding individual organisations to a more flexible approach which supports overall policy development in this area.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48668]

Dr. Howells: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The Department's monitoring systems record the proportion of replies that meet the DfEE correspondence standard, which is that replies will be made within 15 working days of receipt. I also refer the hon. Member to the reply by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *557–58*, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in the current session would affect women; what consultation he had with women's organisations; and if he will make a statement. [49084]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Guidance on policy appraisal for equal treatment has been available since 1992. Application of the guidance has been the responsibility of individual Departments.

We consult a wide range of organisations on the gender impact of our policies. We have also published, and make use of, disaggregated statistics which show gender differences across the whole spectrum of education, training and employment.

As an example of this, the Equal Opportunities Commission and Women's National Commission were included in the wide ranging consultation on the White Paper, "Excellence in Schools" which has formed the basis for much of the Teaching and Higher Education Bill and the Schools Standards and Framework Bill. Further consultation is planned on the regulations which will flow from the Bills and, where appropriate, women's groups will be included.

Childminders

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many childminders are registered with *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster local authorities; how many children aged (i) under five and (ii) five to 11 years are cared for by registered childminders in these authorities; and what was the average charge for each place. [49617]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *617*.

Ayaz Sheikh

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his Department's letter of 19 March 1997, if he will make a statement on the case of Ayaz Sheikh of 4 Thorpewell, Leicester, date of birth 11 April 1986. [49949]

Ms Estelle Morris: Ayaz Sheikh's case was considered by the Social Educational Needs Tribunal on 18 June 1998. The Tribunal upheld Mr. and Mrs. Sheikh's appeal against the provision specified in Ayaz's statement, including the school names in Part IV. They ordered that the statement should be amended to name Sutherland

House School, Nottingham. This is an independent special school for pupils with autism. Leicester City Local Education Authority will make arrangements to Ayaz to be admitted to Sutherland House School starting in the spring term of 1999.

Autistic Children

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his Department's policy towards autistic children; and what guidelines his Department issues on the placing of autistic children in schools. [49950]

Ms Estelle Morris: Schools and local education authorities have statutory duties to identify, assess and provide for children's special educational needs, including the individual needs of children with autistic spectrum disorders. In doing so they must have regard to the guidance contained in the Department's "Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs". Decisions by LEAs on the placement of autistic children with statements of SEN will reflect the profile of the particular child's autism and may be in autism specific schools, other special schools, units in mainstream schools or in mainstream classes with support. The Department will publish shortly the report of a study by the University of Birmingham, assessing the current research evidence about the educational interventions for children with autism.

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* head teachers, *(b)* deputy head teachers and *(c)* teachers, have taken early retirement in Gloucestershire Local Education Authority in the financial year 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [50066]

Ms Estelle Morris: Early retirements[1] from the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special sectors in Gloucestershire in the financial year 1997–98 are as shown.

Retirements	*Head teachers*	*Deputy head teachers*	*Classroom teachers*[2]
Premature retirement	19	14	89
Ill-health retirement	3	3	21
Total	22	17	110

[1] Provisional data

[2] Includes one unqualified teacher

Note:

Changes in the statutory regulations governing early retirement came into force during 1997–98. The changes made teachers' employers responsible for the extra cost of premature retirement and clarified the definition of ill-health in the case of applications for ill-health retirement benefits

Education Funding

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress towards achieving the harmonisation of funding of the education of 16 to 19 year olds in full-time education. [50150]

Dr. Howells: A group of local authorities has been looking at alternative approaches to the principles on which school sixth forms are funded, including the scope for introducing those used in further education (funding for recruitment, programme delivery and achievement). We expect to receive a progress report later this month which will help to inform them on how they wish to proceed.

The levels of funding available to school sixth forms and FE colleges for their 16–19 students will be affected by the outcome of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review and by local authority decisions on the level of spending they devote to schools from their overall spending settlement.

Internet

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department takes to publicise the educational benefits of the Internet. [50649]

Dr. Howells: The Government have announced a major initiative to connect schools to the Internet through the National Grid for Learning. Plans were set out in "Connecting the Learning Society", which was published last Autumn and circulated widely within the education service, industry and other interested parties. The Government are supporting in 1998–99 through the Standards Fund and other means over £100 million for the development of the National Grid for Learning.

The educational benefits of networking and the Internet were established and disseminated widely through the outcomes of the Education Departments' Superhighways Initiative, "Preparing for the Information Age", published last year.

Further advice on the educational benefits of the Internet is contained in "Connecting Schools, Networking People", published by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency. This contains procurement, planning and good practice guidance in the use of information and communications technologies in schools.

Copies of all the above documents are available in the Library.

Nursery Schools

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many nursery places within the Hereford and Worcester Local Education Authority were available for four year olds in maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained primary schools in January 1998; and how many are forecast to be available for January 1999. [50452]

Ms Estelle Morris: Provisional figures show that in the Hereford and Worcester Local Education Authority area there were 1,014 four-year-olds in maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained primary schools, as at January 1998.

From September 1998, Herefordshire and Worcestershire LEAs have guaranteed that they will be able to secure a free, good quality place for every four-year-old whose parents want one in the maintained, private or voluntary sectors.

Further Education, Hampshire

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of further education colleges in Hampshire had their funding reduced for 1997–98. [46003]

Dr. Howells: Some 60 per cent. of colleges in Hampshire received lower funding allocations for the academic year 1997/98 than for the previous academic year. Colleges in Hampshire will benefit from the additional £100 million that has been made available for the sector in 1998/99.

Child Care

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the cost to local authorities of carrying out the audit of the supply of and demand for child care set out in the Green Paper, Meeting the Childcare Challenge. [50854]

Mr. Alan Howarth: It is not possible to assess with precision the cost to partnerships of conducting local audits. In preparing their audits Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships will be able to draw upon information about child care that local authorities are already obliged by law to collect or make available, for example day care reviews and Children's Services Plans required by the Children and Young Persons Acts. Research carried out for my Department has shown that the extent and quality of information held by local authorities varies widely. We are making available £12 million pounds to help local partnerships conduct audits and draw up local child care plans.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the regional conferences and workshops for partnership members and others which have been held as a follow-up to the Green Paper, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge". [50853]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Regional conferences have been held in Sheffield, Gateshead, Bristol and London to follow up the Green Paper. They were attended by a range of organisations including local authorities, Training and Enterprise Councils, private and voluntary providers, child care organisations and employers.

A workshop on child care information services has also been held, and workshops on training and qualifications, child care audits, guidance for child care partnerships and involving employers in child care and family friendly employment will be held from July through to the autumn.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many copies of the Green Paper, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge", were *(a)* published and *(b)* distributed. [50850]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Stationery Office produced 10,000 copies of the Green Paper, of which the Department for Education and Employment bought 4,500. Of these some 2,500 were distributed to interested organisations and individuals, 1,200 copies were distributed within Government and the remaining copies were kept for use during the consultation period. We have also produced a leaflet summarising the Green Paper, of which 1.1 million copies were printed. Most of these have now been distributed to parents, child care providers and others.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to publish responses to the Green Paper, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge". [50855]

Mr. Alan Howarth: All responses to the Green Paper received by the Government are available for public inspection, unless the respondent has requested that they remain confidential. The Government will take account of these responses when it produces guidance for the new child care partnerships in October. We will consider what other Government response to the consultation is needed in the light of the comments we receive.

Assisted Places Scheme

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the uprating of the parental contribution scales for the Assisted Places Scheme for the 1998–99 school year. [51258]

Mr. Byers: Revised scales have been incorporated in the 1998 Amendment Regulations which have been laid before Parliament today. The scales and allowances have been uprated by 2.7 per cent. Where relevant income does not exceed £10,414, the tuition fee will be wholly remitted so that the child receives a free place. The new provisions are set out in the following table.

Assisted places scheme Parental contribution scales for school year 1998–99

percentage

Part of relevant income to which percentage applies	*One assisted pupil*	*Each of two assisted pupils*	*Each of three assisted pupils*
That part which exceeds £10,248 but does not exceed £11,144	9	6.75	5.25
That part (if any) which exceeds £11,144 but does not exceed £12,053	12	9	7
That part (if any) which exceeds £12,053 but does not exceed £13,858	15	11.25	8.75
That part (if any) which exceeds £13,858 but does not exceed £16,639	21	15.75	12.25
That part (if any) which exceeds £16,639 but does not exceed £20,264	24	18	14
That part (if any) which exceeds £20,264	33	24.75	19.25

Education (Grammar School Ballots) Regulations

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to publish final statutory instruments on the Education (Grammar School Ballots) Regulations. [50860]

Mr. Byers: Subject to the School Standards and Framework Bill receiving Royal Assent and to affirmative resolution debates in both Houses, I expect the Regulations to be published before the end of the Parliamentary Session.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hunt Kennels

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *20–26*, if he will list the reasons for the unsatisfactory audit finding for each hunt kennel listed. [46571]

Mr. Rooker: It is not possible to list the individual failures found during State Veterinary Service specified risk material (SRM) audit visits during 1998 to the hunt kennels listed in my reply of 15 June as this could prejudice any legal action being considered by the local authority concerned. It is the local authority, rather than Government Departments, which has enforcement responsibility under the relevant legislation.

For those visits carried out during 1997, release of the information requested has raised a number of legal issues which are being urgently considered. Once this has been completed, I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *20–26*, if he will list the potential *(a)* animal and *(b)* human health risks in circumstances where hunt kennels fail to achieve a satisfactory SRM audit. [46573]

Mr. Rooker: Government measures to combat BSE have greatly reduced the number of cases of preclinical BSE in bovines, and there are relatively few now found in the field. Any animals suspected of suffering from BSE are destroyed in designated incinerators and not taken to hunt kennels. The main throughput of hunt kennels is therefore casualty animals and dead stock from which specified risk material has to be removed and disposed of in accordance with the Specified Risk Material Regulations 1997. Meat from such carcases is not eligible for the human food chain.

The potential human health risks arise from the possible illegal diversion of material into the human food chain. For animal health, the potential risks arise from the possible diversion of SRM into animal by products, and the direct feeding of SRM to hounds, even though no case of a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) developing in dogs has ever been recorded. In all cases, the controls applied on the handling and disposal of SRM in hunt kennels are intended to prevent such risks arising, reinforced by the compliance audit carried out by the State Veterinary Service, the results of which are reported monthly in the BSE Enforcement Bulletin.

In all cases where unsatisfactory audit visits have been reported and investigated, unannounced follow up visits have also been carried out to ensure that any necessary remedial action has been taken.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the failures that were discovered in the surveillance visits in 1997 and 1998 to the *(a)* Llangibby Foxhounds, *(b)* Pentyrow Hunt Kennels, *(c)* Tegryn Farmers Hunt, *(d)* Carmarthen Hunt, *(e)* Llandeilo Hunt, *(f)* Garne Foxhounds Hunt Kennels, *(g)* Amman Valley Hunt and *(h)* Carmarthenshire Hunt Kennels. [46586]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 22 June 1998]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to our hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) today 16 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *303*.

Samaritans

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Samaritans on farming-related issues. [49111]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* We recognise the issue of stress within rural communities and the role the Samaritans play in helping to relieve it. The Ministry participates in the work of the Rural Stress Information Network, provides assistance towards establishing local support networks and makes certain specialist advice available free of charge on referral from agencies such as the Samaritans. My hon. Friend the Minister of State visited the Samaritans' stand at the Three Counties Show to discuss the issues raised with the Samaritans within the rural communities. The Samaritans in Hereford have kindly provided a copy of the video which they have produced and widely distributed. We will be giving further consideration to the issues related to rural stress which have been raised with MAFF Ministers during their regional visits.

Royal Agricultural Benevolent Fund

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings he has had with representatives of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Fund. [49112]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The Ministerial team at MAFF is aware of the good work of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI), who provide financial help and advice through a confidential helpline for members of the farming community suffering hardship.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State has met representatives of the RABI during his visits to the regions, and paid a visit to the RABI stand at the Royal Show. As a result of these contacts, arrangements are in hand for posters and literature explaining the work of the RABI to be displayed in the Department's nine Regional Service Centres. The RABI has already announced it is to extend its work to include farm workers, and Ministers in this Department are keen to see that as wide a section of the farming industry as possible is aware of the RABI.

Environmental Issues

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the organisations *(a)* from which he has received representations and *(b)* which he has consulted which have as part or all of their remit the promotion of (i) biodiversity at the level of the farm, (ii) integrated crop management schemes and (iii) organic farming. [50041]

Dr. John Cunningham: This Department carries out many consultations concerning the areas mentioned. Among the organisations which MAFF regularly consults on one or more of the issues mentioned by the right hon. Member are:

BioDynamic Agriculture Association
Butterfly Conservation
Country Landowners Association
Countryside Commission
Elm Farm Research Centre
English Heritage
English Nature
Environment Agency
Farm and Food Society
Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
Henry Doubleday Research Association
Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association
Linking Farming and the Environment
National Farmers Union
Organic Farmers and Growers
Organic Food Federation
Organic Trust
Plant Life
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAFE Alliance
Scottish Organic Producers Association
Soil Association
Sustainable Agriculture Development Group
The Wildlife Trusts
The Integrated Arable Crop Protection Alliance
Ulster Organic Association
World Wide Fund for Nature UK.

Animal Health Act 1981

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library a copy of the instructions to his staff responsible for applying sections 40 to 49 of the Animal Health Act 1981 and any subordinate legislation made under the same sections of the Act. [50047]

Mr. Morley: I am placing in the Library today a copy of the relevant Guidance Notes for Exporters, which give an explanation of the procedures followed.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the current energy consumption of his Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what plans he has for including energy efficiency performance figures in his Department's annual report. [50411]

Mr. Morley: The latest energy consumption figures available for the Ministry's main estate and its Laboratory Agencies is for 1996–97. It is:

kWh

Electricity	*Gas*	*Oil*	*Total*
37,786,876	59,623,879	9,093,363	106,504,112

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) has set a Government-wide target to reduce energy consumption levels by 20 per cent. up to 31 March 2000 when compared with the base year of 1990–91. By 1996–97, the Ministry's main estate had achieved reductions in energy consumption of 14 per cent. and its Laboratory Agencies had achieved a 6 per cent. reduction. The Ministry will be submitting the annual returns for 1997–98 to DETR when asked to do so, which is expected to be around September.

The energy efficiency performance figures for 1996–97 were included in Chapter 7 of the Ministry's 1998 annual report which was published in April. MAFF's energy efficiency performance will be included in future annual reports.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of his Department's waste is recycled at present; and what targets have been set for increasing this. [50412]

Mr. Morley: Under the Department's action plan for green operations, there is a requirement on all our sites to minimise the generation of waste by encouraging recycling schemes and reusing materials. For example, many of our sites operate paper and other recycling schemes. So far we have not measured waste streams and set targets for waste reduction and recycling because of the practicalities of physically measuring the quantities of waste produced and the extent to which waste is recycled. However, this remains under consideration.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to discourage unnecessary car use by his Department's employees. [50414]

Mr. Morley: The Department has strict rules to ensure that travel on official business is authorised only when it is absolutely necessary and that cars are used only when they are the most cost effective method of travel.

Fishing Regulations

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many vessels have been advised of contraventions of European Union fishing regulations in United Kingdom fishing protection operations in the last three years; and on how many occasions these contraventions have led to prosecutions. [50401]

Mr. Morley: During the period 1995–97, the UK enforcement authorities detected 5,401 infringements of European Union fishing regulations in respect of 2,514 vessels. This has resulted in the masters and/or owners of some 324 vessels being prosecuted in respect of 612 of the infringements detected. There are some cases which are still being processed and the number of prosecutions may therefore rise.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the written parliamentary questions tabled by the right hon. Member for Fylde which remain to be answered. [50248]

Dr. John Cunningham *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* As of today, 16 July, the only written parliamentary questions tabled by the right hon. Member which remain to be answered are two parliamentary questions for which the right hon. Member has named Tuesday 21 and Thursday 23 July for answer and three parliamentary questions for ordinary written answer which appeared in the Order Paper today for the first time.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the fishing industry on his Department's latest proposals for alterations to *(a)* fishing licences generally and *(b)* external water licences. [50546]

Mr. Morley: We have invited the fishing industry to comment on the following proposals for changes in licensing arrangements: the introduction of new licensing arrangements to limit access to the UK's scallop fisheries (consultation letter issued on 11 June and comments invited by 14 August 1998); the aggregation of whitefish licences with pelagic licences for the purposes of introducing pelagic freezer trawlers into the UK fishing fleet (consultation letter issued on 2 July and comments invited by 31 August 1998); more flexible and transparent arrangements for external waters licensing (consultation letter issued on 15 June and comments invited by 17 August 1998).

Representations on each of these proposals are being submitted to the Ministry and copies will be available to the public through the MAFF Library at 3 Whitehall Place (West Block) London SW1A 2AH after the consultation process has been completed.

Additionally, and as announced on 17 December 1997, *Official Report*, columns 336–49, Fisheries Departments are holding a series of meetings with representatives of the principal fishermen's organisations to review the operation of the current licensing arrangements for fishing vessels.

Meat Imports

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce measures to control MBM-fed *(a)* pork and *(b)* bacon imports which do not meet British traceability requirements to take account of BSE outbreaks in continental Europe. [50700]

Mr. Rooker: No. The ban on meat and bone meal in pig feed in the United Kingdom is to prevent cross contamination of ruminant feed with meat and bone meal incorporated into feed for other farm animals. There is, therefore, no basis on which it would be reasonable to restrict imports of pig meat.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what testing of badgers in TB affected areas is currently taking place. [50667]

Mr. Rooker: Although new badger removal operations have now ceased, we are still testing some of the badger carcases which have been removed. Additionally, in areas of TB incidents, where it is felt that this would provide valuable epidemiological evidence, some carcases of badgers which are found dead are tested.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by area the number of herd breakdowns caused by bovine TB since January 1997. [50666]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on 3 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *318–20.* I will write to my hon. Friend with the information relating to the first six months of 1998 when I have it.

Sturgeon and Caviar Imports

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons imports of sturgeon from Iran and caviar from the United Arab Emirates have been banned; what steps have been taken by his Department to have the bans lifted; and what compensation is available to United Kingdom fish merchants who have lost business as a result of the bans. [50723]

Mr. Rooker: The United Arab Emirates is unable to export fishery products to the EU because it is not included in the list of countries authorised to do so under current EU hygiene measures. Transitional arrangements which allowed imports from unlisted countries ended on 1 July 1998. The United Arab Emirates did not provide sufficient guarantees to the Commission by this date and has therefore not been added to the list. It is a matter for the competent authority in the United Arab Emirates to provide such guarantees. Iran is included in a list of countries allowed to continue existing export trade of fishery products to individual Member States until 31 January 1999. There is no compensation available to fish merchants who have lost business as a result of EU hygiene measures.

HEALTH

Salford and Trafford Health Authority

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on what date his Department first requested the Salford and Trafford Health Authority to withdraw its public consultation document on the future of children's health services; and on what grounds; [49359]

(2) on what grounds the Salford and Trafford Health Authority refused to withdraw its consultation paper on children's services when first requested to do so by his Department; [49360]

(3) on what date his Department indicated to the Salford and Trafford Health Authority that a legal direction would be issued requiring the authority to withdraw its consultation on the future of children's services; [49361]

(4) what representations he has received from health authorities which adjoin the Salford and Trafford Health Authority relating to the public consultation on the future of children's health services in Salford and Trafford; and on what dates the representations were received; [49357]

(5) what representations he has received from members of the Salford and Trafford Health Authority in relation to the consultation on the future of children's health services; and on what dates; [49358]

(6) what discussions took place between his Department and the Salford and Trafford Health Authority between the date when the authority refused the Department's request to withdraw its consultation on the future of children's services and the date when a legal direction was issued by the Secretary of State requiring the withdrawal of that document. [49356]

Mr. Dobson *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* We have received no such representations on this matter. The legal direction was issued to, and received by, Salford and Trafford Health Authority on 30 June 1998.

I did not ask the health authority to withdraw its consultation; discussions took place between officials of the Department and representatives of Salford and Trafford Health Authority, to explore the issues and consider the options for withdrawing the proposals.

I am not aware of any representations from health authority members in relation to the consultation on the future of children's health services.

The legal direction was effective immediately and its receipt was acknowledged on 1 July 1998. The purpose of this action was to allow wider consideration of a more systematic improvement of children's services which build on our efforts over the last year to ensure that changes in health services in Manchester, Salford and Trafford are arrived at quickly and as part of an integrated approach across the Health Action Zone.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list all requests which his Department has made since 2 May 1997 for health authorities to withdraw public consultation documents which have been issued in accordance with normal procedures; and in which of those cases *(a)* he has issued a legal direction and *(b)* he is considering issuing a legal direction. [49365]

Mr. Dobson *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* The only such request made by the Department since 2 May 1997 related to the consultation document "Future Hospital Care For the Children and Young People of Salford and Trafford". This was in the form of a legal direction issued by North West Regional Office on my behalf to Salford and Trafford Health Authority. No other such direction is under consideration at the present time.

Public Consultations

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the occasions on which his Department has asked health authorities to withdraw properly conducted public consultations during the 20 years prior to 1 July 1997; and on how many of those occasions the Department subsequently required compliance through the use of a legal direction. [49355]

Mr. Dobson *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* The information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Tonsillectomy

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* by health authority or trust and *(b)* nationally the average waiting time for a tonsillectomy after referral to a consultant. [50079]

Mr. Milburn: Information is available only at specialty level for waiting times for an outpatient appointment to see a consultant following referral by a general practitioner. The latest information for surgical waiting times, following a decision by a consultant to admit for excision of tonsil, is available in *Hospital Episode Statistics Volume 2 Finished consultant episodes: waiting time for elective admissions by diagnosis and operation; England: Financial year 1995–96*, copies of which are available in the Library.

Dementia

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the causes of and treatment for (i) Alzheimer's disease and (ii) other forms of dementia; and what proposals he has to support future research. [50229]

Ms Jowell: The Department directly funds research covering a whole range of issues relating to mental health. There are two programmes—the policy research programme (PRP), which is designed to underpin the development of health and personal social services policy, and the National Health Service research and development programme, which commissions research in and for the NHS.

The PRP is contributing £1 million to the Medical Research Council Study of Cognitive Function and Ageing. This is a multicentre study to examine dementia, its natural history and risks, including Alzheimer's Disease.

The NHS Executive is supporting, through its regionally led research and development programme, a project on mobility and dementia—*"Is physiotherapy during respite care admission effective?"*—at a cost of approximately £140,000. Also, West Midlands regional research and development directorate are directly funding a project which is considering the cost and clinical effectiveness of Aricept for treating mild to moderate dementia at a cost of approximately £600,000.

Hepatitis C

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what treatment is available to people with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C through the NHS; what is the success rate; and what are the side effects; [50384]

(2) if he will make a statement on the *(a)* treatment available, *(b)* success rate of treatment and *(c)* side effects of treatment for people with haemophilia with hepatitis C infection. [50437]

Ms Jowell: People infected with the hepatitis C virus may remain symptom free for many years but a proportion will eventually develop chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis or even liver cancer. At present the only drug licensed in the United Kingdom for the treatment of any patient with hepatitis C is alpha interferon. Some haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C may benefit from treatment and should be offered it when appropriate. However, current experience shows that alpha interferon will only produce a sustained response, that is clear the virus on testing, in 20–25 per cent. of patients. Current research is examining how best to use alpha interferon and testing other antiviral drugs that either alone or in combination with alpha interferon, could give better results.

Alpha interferon is not well tolerated by some people. Most will have a mild reaction including influenza-like symptoms; in others the side effects will be more severe ranging from nausea, influenza-like symptoms and lethargy to depression, cardiovascular problems and hypersensitive reactions. Some will be unable to continue with the treatment. A history of certain types of health problems, for example depression, may be a contra-indication for treatment with the drug.

The Department has commissioned £1 million research into hepatitis C, and a further £0.5 million will be commissioned shortly. It is also supporting the Royal College of Physicians and other professional bodies in the preparation of clinical guidelines on the treatment of hepatitis C with alpha interferon. The guidelines should be ready later this year.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received calling for financial assistance on behalf of people with haemophilia infected with the hepatitis C virus; and if he will make a statement. [50435]

Ms Jowell: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) on 15 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 222.

Home Care Services

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 16 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *162*, on home care services, what factors underlie the changes in each year in the numbers and percentage of adult households in England receiving home help/home care services in each category. [50438]

Ms Jowell: Trends in the provision of domiciliary care reflect the provisions of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. One of the objectives of the Act was to focus services on those most in need.

Figures published in Statistical Bulletin "*Community Care Statistics 1997 Day and domiciliary personal social services for Adults, England*"(ref 1998/13), and summarised in the table, reflect the increased targeting. The table shows that the total number of contact hours has risen, as has the average number of hours spent with each household receiving the service, and the proportion of contact hours spent on more intensive packages of care has increased from 11 per cent. of total hours in 1992 to 28 per cent. in 1997.

Home help/care contact hours, households receiving service, average contact hours per household, and "intensive" packages of service during the survey week in September/October each year 1992 to 1997, England

Year	*Total home help/care contact hours*	*Number of households receiving service*	*Average contact hours per household receiving service*	*Per cent. of total contact hours spent on "intensive"[1] packages*
1992	1,687,000	528,500	3.2	11
1993	1,780,800	514,600	3.5	12
1994	2,215,100	538,900	4.1	15
1995	2,395,700	513,600	4.7	21
1996	2,486,700	491,100	5.1	25
1997	2,637,800	471,000	5.6	28

[1] "Intensive" = more than 5 visits during the week totalling more than 5 hours

Source:
Department of Health return HH1

Argentine Health Authorities

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on general practice co-operation systems with Argentine health authorities. [48678]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* There are no formal agreements between the United Kingdom and Argentina at Government level covering this area.

The Argentine authorities wish to develop their arrangements for primary health care. The Royal College of General Practitioners met Argentine healthcare experts in the UK in February and took part in a UK healthcare mission to Argentina, supported by the Department of Trade and Industry earlier this month.

Edgware Community Hospital

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the data on the use of Edgware Community Hospital Urgent Treatment Centre will be made available to the Independent Evaluation Team; [50740]

(2) to what medical and nursing protocols the Urgent Treatment Centre, Edgware Community Hospital, is currently operating. [50739]

Mr. Milburn: This is a local matter for the Wellhouse National Health Service Trust. My hon. Friend may, therefore, wish to contact Mr. David Phillips, Chairman of the Trust, for this information.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Government Legal Service

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Attorney-General (1) how many barristers over six years call were employed as lawyers by the Government Legal Service, during each year since 1993; [50098]

(2) how many registered pupil masters were employed by the Government Legal Service; and how many pupils were trained by those pupil masters in each year since 1993. [50099]

The Attorney-General: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Attorney-General what arrangements are in place to provide media training to Crown Prosecution staff; and if he will make a statement. [50144]

The Attorney-General: Media training is available for Chief Crown Prosecutors, Branch Crown Prosecutors and other senior staff. The courses are run by the Crown Prosecution Service's Communications Division and up to six people are trained at a time.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Attorney-General what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49839]

The Attorney-General: An examination of the methods available within my Department is being undertaken as part of the government-wide exercise.

Furthermore, the annual report of the Serious Fraud Office for 1997/98, which was published today, will also be available to hon. Members and members of the public on the SFO World Wide Web site at http://www.sfo.gov.uk. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 17 July 1998

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49812]

Dr. David Clark *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* A variety of different methods of replying electronically to Written Parliamentary Questions is being tested in consultation with the authorities of both Houses of Parliament. These tests are continuing, and we will report on the conclusions as soon as possible.

PRIME MINISTER

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the 10 longest-serving Lord-Lieutenants; [50258]

(2) how many Lord-Lieutenants he has appointed. [50364]

The Prime Minister: On my advice, Her Majesty has appointed 3 Lord-Lieutenants.

The ten longest serving Lord-Lieutenants are:

Sir Thomas Dunne, KCVO (Herefordshire and Worcestershire)

His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury KT VRD (Roxburgh, Ettrick & Lauderdale)

The Earl of Leven and Melville (Nairn)

The Viscount of Arbuthnott KT CBE DSC FRSE (Kincardineshire)

Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison KCVO (Gwent)

Colonel Sir Michael McCorkell KCVO OBE TD (County Londonderry)

The Right Honourable Lord Kingsdown KG (Kent)

Sir David Mansel Lewis KCVO JP BA (Dyfed)

Sir Timothy Colman KG (Norfolk)

Lieutenant Colonel James Stirling of Garden CBE TD (Stirling and Falkirk).

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49881]

Mrs. Ann Taylor *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Under plans for the development of the Government Secure Intranet (GSI), my office expects to be in a position to correspond electronically with hon. Members and the general public by the Autumn. I would also refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster gave today, *Official Report*, column *315*.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Notarial Services

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received concerning the Scriveners Company and the provision of notarial services in central London. [50131]

Mr. Hoon: My Department wrote to interested parties on 29 May to ask for their views on whether the Government should seek to abolish the current statutory requirement that public notaries can practise in the City of London and the surrounding three miles only if they are members of the Scriveners Company. Representations on this subject have been received from a number of individuals and from:

Messrs. Hartwig;

Messrs. John Venn & Sons;

The Association of Solicitor Notaries in Greater London;

The Faculty Office of the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury;

The Law Society of England and Wales;

The Notaries' Society;

The Office of Fair Trading;

The Scriveners Company;

The Society of Public Notaries of London.

The Lord Chancellor hopes to announce the Government's decision in due course.

Magistrates

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to modify his Department's restrictions on deaf people serving as magistrates. [50073]

Mr. Hoon: There is no absolute prohibition on deaf people serving as magistrates. The Lord Chancellor welcomes applications for the magistracy from deaf people who have the capacity, whether with technical aids or otherwise, to follow court proceedings and carry out the range of magisterial duties.

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Millennium Experience

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what meetings he has held with individuals, companies or other organisations regarding sponsorship of zones within the Millennium Dome; if he will list them; and who was responsible for taking the notes at each meeting. [51276]

Mr. Mandelson: I attend meetings with individuals, companies and other organisations on sponsorship of the Millennium Experience on a regular basis in the course of my Ministerial duties.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Vulnerable Road Users

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he plans to reduce the injury rate amongst *(a)* cyclists, *(b)* pedestrians and *(c)* motorcyclists in London; and if he will list his Department's advisers on accident reduction. [48191]

Dr. Strang: The emphasis in London, as for the rest of the country, will be on a continuing programme of initiatives co-ordinating education, enforcement and engineering.

The Government are funding the London boroughs, the Highways Agency and the Traffic Director for London, to implement safety schemes. In addition, they are seeking ways to achieve further understanding of the causes, and co-ordinate that knowledge to promote good practice for the reduction of accidents among vulnerable road users, by working with the Association of London Government and the London Accident Analysis Unit. We will be bringing forward further measures to improve the safety of vulnerable road users as part of our new road safety strategy.

The Department has the following external advisers on road accident research:

Eur.Ing Robert Watson, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders

Ms Clare Holman, Environmental Consultant

Professor Margaret Galer-Flyte, Loughborough University of Technology

Professor Richard Allsop, University College London

Mr. Geoff Maycock, Transport Research Laboratory

Mr. Richard Lowne, Transport Research Laboratory

Mr. Geoff Day, Freight Transport Association

Mr. Edward Chorlton, Devon County Council

Professor Mike McDonald, University of Southampton

Professor Derek Elsom, Oxford Brookes University

Mr. M. Sadeghi, Cranfield Impact Centre Limited

Professor James Reason, University of Manchester.

In addition, in drawing up our new road safety strategy, we are taking advice from a wide range of representatives of local government, the police, voluntary organisations and individual experts. The following external advisers and road safety research are members of the Road Safety Targets and Strategy Steering Group or Sub-Groups:

Hugh Alford, Association of Chief Police Officers

Henry Marks, British Motorcycling Federation

John Moss, Cheshire County Council

Mike Hayes, Child Accident Prevention Trust

Alan Silver, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

Stuart Reid, Cyclist Public Affairs Group

David Harvey, Derby County Council

Bob Doughty, Despatch Association

John Partridge, Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association

Wendy Broome, Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association

Rosemary Welch, Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association

Kevin Kelly, Motorcycle Training Association

Rob Gifford, Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety

Dave Rogers, Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

Fiona Murray, Scottish Road Safety Campaign

Kristine Beuret, Social Research Association

Bob Watson, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders

Bill Carcary, Stirling University

Supt Alistair Anderson, Strathclyde Police

Lynn Sloman, Transport 2000

Chris Lines, Transport Research Laboratory

Richard Lowne, Transport Research Laboratory

Heather Ward, University College London

Professor Richard Allsop, University College London

Jeremy Broughton, Transport Research Laboratory

David Lynam, Transport Research Laboratory

Vince Christie, Local Government Association

Chris Kay, Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association.

Correspondence

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Salisbury, dated 22 May, about delays on the A316 in Twickenham. [49873]

Dr. Strang: The Chief Executive of the Highways Agency replied on 6 July. I apologise for the length of the delay in replying to the hon. Member's letter.

Vehicle Fuel

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many £500 grants have been made for the conversion of vehicles to cleaner fuels. [50332]

Dr. Strang: As announced in the Budget, on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1097–1112, the Government intend to introduce from 1 January 1999, concessionary rates of vehicle excise duty (VED)—worth up to £500—for lorries and buses meeting stringent emissions standards. Thus no vehicles have yet benefited from this concession.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what grants the Government propose to make available for the conversion of taxi cabs to use road fuel gas. [50965]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are funding the Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme which provides grants towards the conversion of vehicles to run on alternative fuels. The duty on road fuel gases has been frozen for two successive Budgets with a commitment in the July 1997 Budget to maintain the differential that existed at that time between the duty on road fuel gases and the duty on diesel.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce a pilot scheme to monitor the benefits of taxi cabs running on road fuel gas. [50966]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has already been involved in research on the environmental benefits of running a taxi on road fuel gases and we will continue to monitor developments in this area. In addition, the Public

Carriage Office is working with manufacturers to encourage the development of alternative greener engines and fuels. The Cleaner Vehicles Task Force has also set up a sub-group to consider the merits of the potential for wider use of alternative fuels. The Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme, funded by Government, provides grants towards alternatively fuelled vehicles, and the costs and performance of vehicles purchased under the scheme will be monitored and evaluated.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he proposes to assist the conversion of buses to use road fuel gases. [51034]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are funding the Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme which provides grants towards the conversion of vehicles to run on alternative fuels. Operators of eligible bus services also receive 100 per cent. rebate on the duty they pay on road fuel gases. The Chancellor announced at the last Budget on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1097–1112, that operators of buses and HGVs, meeting stringent emission standards, would receive a rebate of up to £500 on VED.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce pilot schemes to monitor the advantages and disadvantages of converting buses to use road fuel gases. [51035]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has kept closely in touch with the work that some operators have done on the advantages and disadvantages of converting buses to use road fuel gases, including a number of tests carried out by London Transport Buses.

Brown-field Sites

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what financial incentives exist to encourage the development of urban brownfield and derelict sites. [50333]

Mr. Raynsford: English Partnerships, the Government's regeneration agency, supports physical regeneration projects across England. An important part of their programme is the reclamation and development of brownfield and derelict sites. Applications to English Partnerships are handled within the framework of its single Investment Fund. The operation of this Fund emphasises flexible partnerships and funding mechanisms and seeks to maximise private investment. The Challenge Fund, which is part of the Single Regeneration Budget, is also available for local regeneration partnerships and operates in a similar manner to English Partnerships.

In addition, The Government are committed to exploring the scope for using economic instruments to achieve our planning objectives, including modifications to VAT on housing, a greenfield tax, and reform of planning obligations. A key objective of all these options would be to discourage greenfield development and promote brownfield development.

Refrigerant Gases

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to ensure that the fire risk posed by hydrocarbon refrigerant gases is minimised and that these gases are properly and safely disposed of after use. [50577]

Angela Eagle: The use of hydrocarbons as refrigerants is covered by the standards BS EN 60335–2-24 and BS4434. When hydrocarbons are used in refrigerators appropriate safety precautions must be taken, encompassing design, operational and maintenance procedures. The Health and Safety Executive also produce guidance on the safe handling of liquefied petroleum gases (LPG) including hydrocarbon gases used as refrigerants. The guidance, which can be applied to a wide variety of circumstances, gives practical advice on the safe storage and use of LPG and also offers advice on basic fire precautions to be taken when handling such gases.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that HFCs used in refrigerators are recycled or disposed of properly so that they are not released into the atmosphere. [50576]

Angela Eagle: Sections 33(1)(c) and 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 oblige the producers and holders of waste to prevent its release to atmosphere. The application of these controls to CFC refrigerants is explained in DOE Circular 11/94 paragraphs 4.95–4.103, but the guidance is also applicable to other waste refrigerants.

The Government have also agreed a Declaration of intent with the refrigeration and air conditioning industry with the aim of reducing emissions of HFCs, which are global warming gases. The Declaration recommends that the servicing, maintenance and decommissioning of equipment containing HFCs are carried out only by competent persons. It also encourages all reasonably practicable precautionary measures to minimise refrigerant leakage, and recommends that refrigerants are recovered for re-use, reclamation or disposal during servicing and prior to equipment decommissioning. The Government will be issuing a consultation paper later in the summer on policy options for meeting their commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, including HFCs.

Allotments

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what encouragement he is giving to local authorities to *(a)* maintain and preserve allotments and *(b)* provide replacement land where land formerly used for allotments has been subject to development. [50655]

Angela Eagle: The Government are currently considering the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's report into 'The Future for Allotments', and will produce a formal response in due course. Section 8 of the Allotments Act 1925 provides that the Secretary of State must consent to the disposal of statutory allotment land by a local authority.

(a) Since 25 March 1998, statutory allotment land has been given increased protection by placing a requirement on authorities to demonstrate the steps they have taken to promote allotments in their area before they can dispose of such land.

(b) Consent under section 8 of the 1925 Act may not be given unless the Secretary of State is satisfied either that adequate provision will be made for displaced plotholders, or that such provision is not necessary or is impracticable.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage the use of allotments with particular reference to their potential for growing organic vegetables. [50651]

Angela Eagle: The Government are currently considering the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's report into the 'The Future for Allotments', and will produce a formal response in due course.

Occupational Illness or Injury

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many working days were lost in the last year for which figures are available as a result of occupational illness or injury, separately identifying self-certificated absences; and if he will make a statement. [50631]

Angela Eagle: In 1995 an estimated 19.5 million days were lost due to a work-related illness in Great Britain based on a five day week. There were an estimated 9.8 million days when workers were unavailable for work as a result of occupational injury in 1994–95, the latest year for which figures are available. This figure will include weekends and other days which are not workdays for some workers. The number of self-certified absences due to occupational illness or injury cannot be separately identified.

East London Line

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has evaluated for the re-opening of the East London Line between Dalston and Shoreditch. [50713]

Ms Glenda Jackson: At the request of the Deputy Prime Minister, London Underground prepared a report on the options for extending the East London Line and submitted it to the Deputy Prime Minister in December 1997. The Government are considering with London Transport how best to take the project forward.

London Government

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date the official figures from London's local government elections and referendum held on 7 May were disseminated to libraries in London; and by whom this task was carried out. [50822]

Mr. Raynsford: I understand that the London Research Centre will publish "London Borough Council Elections 7 May 1998" (ISBN 1 85261 271 2), a publication containing details of voting figures in London local elections and the referendum, on 27 July, and that copies will be sent to, among others, the Chief Librarian in each London Borough.

Endangered Species

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the species of (i) flora and (ii) fauna identified as being in danger of extinction within the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1986, *(b)* 1991 and *(c)* 1996. [50931]

Mr. Meacher: I will ensure that the information requested—which is of a complex nature—is made available to the hon. Member shortly. It will be placed in the House Library next week.

Foodstuffs (Seal Oil)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy in respect of foodstuffs containing oil derived from seals; and if he will make a statement. [50934]

Angela Eagle: The Department of Health report that there is no evidence that foodstuffs containing oil derived from seals are widely consumed in the United Kingdom.

Monk seals (*Monachus* spp.), Fur seals (*Artocephalus* spp.) and the Southern elephant-seal (*Mirounga leonina*) are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to which the UK is a Party. Under Council Regulation EC 338/97 which implements CITES in the EU, imports and exports of specimens of protected species and their parts and derivatives, including foodstuffs, are controlled under a licensing system. The most endangered species (ie Monk seals, and the Juan Fernandez (*Arctocephalus philippii*) and Guadelupe (*Artocephalus townsendi*) fur seals) are banned from international trade. Within the EU this extends to any commercial use, including buying, selling and display.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the legal protection of sites of special scientific interest. [50929]

Mr. Meacher: We are presently considering a number of means for improving the protection and management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Officials are preparing a consultative paper which we hope to publish later this year. If legislation proves necessary we will look for a suitable opportunity.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlie the rate of damage to SSSIs over the last five years. [50930]

Mr. Meacher: The annual reports produced by English Nature summarise the key factors underlying damage to SSSIs. The number of incidents of damage has now decreased to well below 1 per cent. of SSSIs by area per year compared to 3 per cent. in the early 1990s. The main cause of damage is agricultural activities such as under and overgrazing, high levels of fertiliser application and the pollution of water courses. Other impacts include over-abstraction of water and 3rd party damage, such as the use of off-road vehicles. Occasional losses occur for housing, roads, and industrial development, although this has decreased considerably over the last five years.

River Levels (Wildlife)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the impact on wildlife of the present abstraction levels from rivers; and if he will make a statement. [50933]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency is responsible for licensing water abstraction in England and Wales, a function it exercises in conjunction with its other statutory duties which include the conservation of flora and fauna which are dependent on an aquatic environment. In its May 1998 submission to the Government entitled *A Price Worth Paying*, which is in the Library of the House, the Agency, in consultation with English Nature and the Countryside Council of Wales, has listed sites which are considered to be affected by abstractions. A number of these sites are designated for their international importance for birds or other wildlife. We shall take the Agency's advice on these sites into account in determining the guidance we give to the Director General of Water Services on the environmental obligations which water companies will be expected to meet through the Periodic Review of water prices.

Recycled Land

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *9–10*, concerning recycled land, what completion date he has set for local authorities undertaking the identification work. [50935]

Mr. Raynsford: Data collection from local authorities for phase one of the National Land Use Database, which covers vacant previously developed land which may be available for redevelopment, is scheduled to take place between August and October. This should enable English Partnerships to publish information on an initial set of sites suitable for redevelopment by the end of the year, and DETR to publish summary statistics based on information on all sites by March 1999.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Society, contained in the report Predictable and Unaccountable, with reference to the electoral arrangements for the Greater London Authority. [50941]

Mr. Raynsford: Following extensive consultation, which included representations made by the Electoral Reform Society, we set our proposals for electoral arrangements for the Greater London Authority in the White Paper, "A Mayor and Assembly for London". The proposals were endorsed by the people of London in the Referendum held on 7 May. We intend to bring forward legislation to implement our proposals as soon as the legislative timetable permits.

NHS Staff (Accidents)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many NHS employees in Wales were killed or injured at work in each year since 1991. [51236]

Angela Eagle: The information is as follows:

Injuries in Wales to employees in the NHS as reported to HSE 1991–92 to 1997–98

Year	*Fatal*	*Major*	*Over 3 day*	*Total*
1991–92	0	24	234	258
1992–93	0	29	298	327
1993–94	0	30	338	368
1994–95	0	32	440	472
1995–96	0	44	344	388
1996–97	0	74	495	569
1997–98[1]	0	83	603	686

[1] 1997–98 figures are provisional

Notes:

1. Years commence 1 April
2. 1996–97 and 1997–98 non-fatal injury figures cannot be directly compared to previous years' figures as they were reported under different legislation (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR 85 and RIDDOR 95)
3. 1997–98 figures are provisional

Roads Review

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the forthcoming Roads Review will announce the completion of the dualling of the A11. [50959]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We shall be announcing the conclusions of the Roads Review shortly.

Fishing Vessels

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the number of registered British fishing vessels *(a)* under 12 metres and *(b)* over 12 metres in length and the number of fishermen's lives lost from each in each of the last five years. [46477]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[pursuant to her reply, 23 June 1998, c. 434]:* The number of vessels on the UK fishing vessel register at 31 December in each of the last 5 years, both under 12 metres and 12 metres and over in length, and the numbers of fishermen's lives lost from vessels in those length ranges in each year are as follows:

	Fishing vessels under 12 metres		*Fishing vessels 12 metres and over*	
Year	*Vessels on register*	*Lives lost*	*Vessels on Register*	*Lives lost*
1993	9,219	10	1,871	8
1994	8,470	12	1,729	14
1995[1]	7,499	8	1,652	11
1996	6,583	9	1,493	11
1997	6,354	8	1,425	21

[1] The total figure for the number of deaths for 1995 is reported as 16 in the MAIB Annual Report 1995 but has since been revised to 19 following the assumption of 3 deaths aboard the missing fishing vessel Provider

Sources:

RSS for numbers of registered fishing vessels by calendar year (Note MSA Annual Report 1997–98 will quote MAFF figures for 1993 to 1996 and RSS for 1997). MAIB for the numbers of deaths by calendar year.

OSPAR Convention

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his objectives at the forthcoming Oslo-Paris convention in Lisbon. [49322]

Mr. Meacher: The main purposes of this first Ministerial Meeting of the Commission established by the 1992 OSPAR Convention for the protection of the marine environment of the North East Atlantic are to round off certain aspects left unresolved by the 1992 Convention and to set the strategies for the Commission over the next generation.

When the OSPAR Convention was negotiated in 1992, the then French and UK Governments insisted that the Convention should preserve a potential future option for France and the UK to re-start the dumping at sea of low-and intermediate-level radioactive waste. Last September the UK and France announced that they would give up that option. The Ministerial Meeting is expected to approve a formal instrument to terminate the option. There will thus be a complete ban on dumping radioactive waste.

In 1992, there was insufficient support for extending the competence of the OSPAR Commission beyond land-based discharges, dumping, the offshore oil and gas industry and the monitoring and assessment of the marine environment. Largely as a result of UK initiatives, the Ministerial meeting is expected to approve a new Annexe to the Convention on the protection of marine wildlife and habitats. This will fill an important lacuna.

The Ministerial Meeting will also aim to adopt new rules on the disposal of disused offshore installations. The UK is committed to returning all disused offshore installations to land wherever it is safe and practicable to do so. The problem is to settle how to deal with the exceptions.

There is substantial agreement to a regime which would provide for a general ban on dumping such installations or leaving them in place, subject to:

a. derogations for some large steel installations, all existing concrete installations and exceptional and unforseen circumstances; and

b. an assessment framework and consultation procedures before such derogations can be allowed.

The definition of the category of large steel installations where derogations are to be allowed remains to be agreed. There is also a question about future concrete installations.

The UK is making a new proposal on large steel installations. We have already accepted that it will generally be safe and practicable to return all topsides to land. Discussion of large steel installations has therefore been about the substructures. So far, all parties have considered these substructures as a whole. We now think that it would be helpful to distinguish between the footings of the substructures and the rest of them.

In order to help achieve consensus, the UK is now prepared to accept a general obligation to return all the parts of all large steel structures above the footings to land for recycling or final disposal. My hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry has played a large part in developing this idea. This would mean that there would be a complete ban on dumping steel installations, which is what many have sought. Such a ban would also prohibit the toppling of all steel installations. Footings will be considered on a case by case basis but with a presumption that they will be removed wherever practicable and safe to do so.

With the new Convention, Ministers from the Contracting Parties need to agree the basis on which the officials will work internationally over the next decades. We want to agree strategies that are demanding but achievable and which will guide the work of the OSPAR Commission over the next twenty years or more. These strategies need to be acceptable to all the Contracting Parties, and we shall therefore be considering with our colleagues the various proposals on the table. We must be satisfied of our ability to deliver on any commitments we enter into. The strategies under consideration are.

a. *Hazardous substances:* The proposed strategy on hazardous substances represents a major new initiative. The strategy should make a clear commitment to ultimate goals of reducing concentrations of hazardous substances in the marine environment to background levels for naturally occurring substances and close to zero for man-made synthetic substances, and to a time frame of moving towards the cessation of discharges of hazardous substances by 2020. There should also be a mechanism to identify the hazardous substances that we should be tackling as priorities. This strategy would be a major new step, working in parallel with the EC Framework Directive on Water. The strategy should also provide for new efforts to identify and tackle endocrine disruptors.

b. *Radioactive substances:* At the September 1997 meeting of the OSPAR Commission, we restated our wish to make progress on reducing radioactive discharges to sea and we will fulfil this commitment. To ensure that we are able to foresee and avoid problems related to radioactive discharges in future, we shall be asking nuclear operators to prepare forward looking strategies for the next twenty years.

c. *Nutrients:* The main action to reduce the substances that cause eutrophication comes from the EC Nitrates and Urban Waste Water Directives. The proposed strategy would complement these by setting up a mechanism to identify eutrophication problem areas and potential problem areas, and to develop further actions to deal with these where existing programmes are not good enough.

d. *Wildlife:* To flesh out the new Annexe on Wildlife, the proposed strategy would provide for assessing a wide range of human activities that may adversely affect wildlife at sea, and the development of measures to address the problems which are identified. This would represent a new departure in trying to get international agreement on programmes that will protect marine wildlife outside territorial waters.

e. *Offshore oil and gas:* Work in this field has been concentrated on the proposed decision on the disposal of offshore installations. But we will support commitments to develop a long-term strategy to validate environmental management systems and to set their goals.

Finally, we want to find ways of getting wider membership of OSPAR. The Czech Republic (through the Elbe) and the Russian Federation are important for OSPAR waters: we would like to open a dialogue with them. We also need to find ways to help the lessons OSPAR has learnt to be applied in other regions.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Civic Forum

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the estimated timetable for setting up the consultative Civic Forum to work with members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. [50403]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has referred the establishment of the Civic Forum to the shadow Northern Ireland Assembly. In the period before devolution the Government intend to consult with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Assembly so that arrangements can be put in hand to help secure its earliest appropriate establishment.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will ensure that papers produced by the New Northern Ireland Assembly are made available to hon. Members through the Vote Office; and if she will make a statement. [50419]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Copies of the Official Record will be laid in the Library at Westminster, but the circulation of other papers produced by the Assembly should be a matter, initially, for the Assembly itself to determine.

Cancer Treatment

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the capital expenditure needed to develop the cancer treatment facilities at the Belfast City Hospital; and when the developments are planned to be completed. [50133]

Mr. Worthington: The preliminary estimate of the capital cost of the proposed Cancer Centre is £28 million, including equipment. The current aim is to have the Centre constructed within 5 years.

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for the closure of cancer treatment services at Belvoir Park Hospital; and when the final transfer of such services to the Belfast City Hospital is expected to take place. [50135]

Mr. Worthington: The cancer treatment services at Belvoir Park Hospital will continue until a new Cancer Centre at the Belfast City Hospital site has been completed. The transfer is expected to take place within five years. In the meantime management responsibility for cancer services at Belvoir Park Hospital will transfer to Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust later this year.

Ambulance Service

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what were the *(a)* number, *(b)* type and *(c)* age of ambulances in service with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in each of the last five years. [50326]

Mr. Worthington: The information is given in the tables.

Accident and emergency vehicles

Age (years)	*1998*	*1997*	*1996*	*1995*	*1994*
0–1	18	0	13	4	36
1–2	0	13	4	36	7
2–3	13	4	36	7	4
3–4	4	36	7	4	22
4–5	36	7	4	22	14
5–6	7	4	22	14	25
6–7	4	22	14	25	14
7–8	22	14	25	14	9
8–9	14	25	1	5	1
9–10	15	1	5	1	0
10–11	0	5	1	0	1
11–12	0	1	0	1	0
12–13	0	0	1	0	0
13–14	0	1	0	0	0

Patient car service vehicles

Age (years)	*1998*	*1997*	*1996*	*1995*	*1994*
0–1	9	5	0	0	5
1–2	5	0	0	5	8
2–3	0	0	5	8	1
3–4	0	5	8	1	12
4–5	5	8	1	12	17
5–6	8	1	12	17	16
6–7	1	12	17	16	10
7–8	12	17	16	10	5
8–9	17	16	10	5	7
9–10	16	10	5	7	0
10–11	8	5	7	0	0
11–12	0	2	0	0	0

Minimum Wage

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessments she has made of the effect of the introduction of the national minimum wage in terms of *(a)* the total number of people employed and *(b)* the numbers employed in each sector of the economy. [50151]

Mr. Ingram: Current estimates indicate that a total of approximately 66,000 employees in employment in Northern Ireland will be directly affected when the national minimum wage is introduced in April 1999. The majority of these work in service sector industries. Current data sources are not robust enough to provide reliable detailed sectoral estimates.

Railways (Antrim-Bleach Green Line)

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* new stations will be constructed and *(b)* old stations re-opened and at what estimated cost, on the railway line between Antrim and Bleach Green. [50137]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The upgrading of 2 former railway halts, at Templepatrick and Mossely West, is planned as part of the reinstatement of the Antrim to Bleach Green line at an estimated cost of £1.4 million.

Downe Hospital

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which services will be provided in the proposed new Downe Hospital. [50325]

Mr. Worthington: I announced my decision on 28 May to support the development of a new modern hospital for Downpatrick. To that end I have asked the Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust, in conjunction with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and local GPs, to develop a proposal for a new hospital which will build on developments in treatments and technology and treat patients in the most appropriate setting locally while continuing to have access to a considerable range of acute services supported by the necessary specialist services and back-up facilities available from larger acute centres in Belfast.

Road Accident Injury Claims

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in Northern Ireland made road accident injury claims, and how much was paid by the Government for such claims, in each of the last five years. [50146]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The following personal injury claims were made against the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland Roads Services and the total expenditure on all personal injury claims concluded in the last 5 years has been:

£

Year	*New claims*	*Total expenditure*
1997–98	1,985	3,805,957.45
1996–97	1,712	2,823,289.50
1995–96	1,789	2,967,018.60
1994–95	1,701	4,302,311.40
1993–94	1,622	3,908,445.69

The figures include claims arising from footpath incidents. It is not possible, without disproportionate cost, to distinguish those claims related specifically to road accidents.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the cost to public funds of expenses for Lord-Lieutenants in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years. [50265]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Expenditure incurred by the Northern Ireland Office on Lord-Lieutenants' expenses in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	*Amount (£)*[1]
1988–89	4,000
1989–90	6,000
1990–91	4,000
1991–92	8,000
1992–93	5,000
1993–94	6,000
1994–95	10,000
1995–96	6,000
1996–97	14,000
1997–98	9,000

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest £1,000

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Lord-Lieutenants currently serve Northern Ireland. [50266]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The number of Lord-Lieutenants currently serving in Northern Ireland is 8.

DEFENCE

Territorial Army

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what cash savings his Department will achieve through restructuring the TA; what proportion of those savings will *(a)* be re-allocated to the regular army and *(b)* form part of his Department's efficiency savings. [51036]

Dr. Reid: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Surplus Property and Land

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those properties and lands identified for disposal by his Department. [51037]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has a large number of properties which have been identified as surplus and are now in the process of disposal. These range from major establishments and airfields, to smaller plots and single houses. A list of sites currently in disposal was placed in the Library earlier this year, on 23 February 1998, *Official Report*, column *41*. That list is now being updated. As part of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) we have identified further sites for disposal some of which are listed in Supporting Essay 11 to the SDR White Paper, and on some of which final discussions have not yet been reached.

To provide our assessment of the open market value of individual sites might prejudice the eventual sale and I am therefore withholding the information under Exemptions 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Strategic Defence Review, if he will make a statement on the basis of his Department's assumptions that receipts from sales of properties and land from the Defence Estate will double over the next four years. [50963]

Mr. Spellar: The figure for estimated disposal receipts included in the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) White Paper is based upon our assessment of the open market value of the properties currently identified for disposal. In some cases this is based on in-house valuations carried out by professional surveyors, and in others on valuations carried out by consultants. The figure also allows for receipts from sites which are likely to come forward as a result of studies and further rationalisation of the estate following SDR.

Manpower Reductions

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what long-term financial savings his Department will achieve through the reduction of *(a)* military and *(b)* civilian manpower. [50957]

Dr. Reid: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Strategic Defence Review, on what basis his Department estimated that the defence share of GDP will fall from 2.7 to 2.4 per cent. in 2002. [50962]

Mr. George Robertson: The assumptions which have been used to calculate that the defence share of GDP will fall from 2.7 per cent. to 2.4 per cent. are taken from the Economic Assumptions for Public Finance Projections contained within Table B1 of the "Financial Statement and Budget Report", March 1998, HC Paper No. 620.

Service Leavers

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provision his Department makes to assist service leavers in their transition to civilian life; and if he will make a statement. [51645]

Dr. Reid: My Department is laying the foundations of a modern resettlement service, by introducing improvements to match the changing employment market and aspirations of Service leavers. A contract has been awarded today to Coutts Consulting Group plc to work with my Department in establishing a Career Transition Partnership. The new arrangements will provide a focused individual service, including counselling, workshops and nationwide job finding support. The contract will run, initially, for a period of five years.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost to public funds of expenses for Lord-Lieutenants in England in each of the last 10 years. [50261]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

Expenditure incurred by the Home Office and the Department of Trade and Industry[1] on Lord-Lieutenants' expenses in each of the last ten years is as follows:

£

Year	*Amount*[2]
1988–89	190,000
1989–90	225,000
1990–91	253,000
1991–92	305,000
1992–93	372,000
1993–94	479,000
1994–95	572,000
1995–96	736,000
1996–97	672,000
1997–98	784,000

[1] The Department of Trade and Industry pays expenses incurred by Lord-Lieutenants in the presentation of the Queen's Awards for Industry

[2] Figures rounded to the nearest £1000

Some local authorities in England also support lieutenancy activities. Information on any costs incurred is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

WALES

Pharmaceutical Pricing Scheme

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what criteria he will take into account in the renegotiations of the Pharmaceutical Pricing Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [49565]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

Occupational Health

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many medical and nursing staff have worked in occupational health in the NHS in Wales in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and what were the grades of those employees; [51235]

(2) how many unfilled consultant or approved training posts there are in occupational health in Wales; [51234]

(3) how many whole-time-equivalent NHS consultants there are in post in Wales in occupational health; and how many are *(a)* full and *(b)* part-time. [51233]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Information on medical staff employed by the NHS in Wales is collected by means of an annual census of staff in post at 30 September. Information on those staff with a specialty of occupational medicine in given in the table.

Medical staff in post at 30 September with a main specialty of occupational health (whole-time equivalent number)

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Consultant	4.1	4.5	4.5	3.7	3.2
Senior registrar	1.0	—	—	—	—
Hospital practitioner	0.2	0.2	—	—	—
Clinical assistant	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.5

As part of the census information is sought on vacant posts. Data collected from NHS Trusts and Health Authorities for the 1997 census indicated that there were no vacant posts in occupational health at that time.

The 3.2 whole-time equivalent consultant staff in 1997 related to 5 consultants in number, 2 full-time and 3 part-time.

Information on nursing staff is not collected on the basis of individual specialties and, therefore, the number of nurses working in occupational health is not available centrally.

NHS Premises (Accidents)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps his Department takes to ensure that NHS trusts have adequate arrangements for recording accidents on NHS premises; what encouragement is given

to staff to report accidents; and what steps the NHS Executive takes to monitor the safety performance of NHS trusts. [51238]

Mr. Win Griffiths: All employers, including NHS Trusts, have a legal obligation to report accidents to the Health and Safety Executive under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995. It is for individual employers to encourage their employees to report incidents. Monitoring the safety performance of employers is a matter for the Health and Safety Executive.

Land Development

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will give details and dates of occasions when *(a)* the Welsh Development Agency, *(b)* the Development Board for Rural Wales and *(c)* the Land Authority for Wales have sought consent either before the event or retrospectively for land development acquisitions and deals without planning permission; and if he will make a statement. [51222]

Mr. Ron Davies: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the cost to public funds of expenses for Lord-Lieutenants in Wales in each of the last 10 years. [50263]

Mr. Ron Davies: Expenditure incurred by the Welsh Office on Lord-Lieutenants' expenses in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	*Amount (£)*
1998–89	'9,000
1989–90	'13,000
1990–91	'14,000
1991–92	'14,000
1992–93	17,000
1993–94	18,000
1994–95	15,000
1995–96	19,000
1996–97	20,000
1997–98	21,000

' Stationery figures are not included, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Note:

All figures rounded to nearest £1,000

Some local authorities in Wales also support lieutenancy activities. Information on these costs is not available centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many Lord-Lieutenants currently serve Wales. [50264]

Mr. Ron Davies: The number of Lord-Lieutenants currently serving Wales is 8.

TREASURY

Local Authority Capital Receipts

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what amount of asset sales have been realised *(a)* by each local authority and *(b)* in total by local authorities in each of the last five years. [48759]

Mr. Darling: Estimates for total local authority capital receipts in each of the last five years were published in Table 6.10 of *Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 1998–99* (Cm 3901). The same document also includes, in Table 1.6, figures over the period in question for the proceeds from the sale of fixed assets. I will write shortly to my hon. Friend with a breakdown of total capital receipts by individual local authority.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48671]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 14 July 1998, *Official Report,* column *159.*

Tesco Plc

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the occasions upon which Ministers and officials have met Tesco plc or their representatives or advisers since 1 May 1997. [50156]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Treasury Ministers, special advisers and other officials have extensive dealings with organisations in both the public and private sectors as part of their official duties. It would be impracticable to maintain a central record of meetings with representatives of external bodies.

Illegal Drugs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cash value of the illegal drugs trade within the United Kingdom; and what assessment he has made of its impact on the United Kingdom economy. [50658]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The Office for National Statistics published an article in the July 1998 edition of *Economic Trends* which provides some illustrative estimates of the value of illegal economic activities, including trade in drugs. A copy of this publication is available in the House of Commons Library. The estimates are not yet sufficiently developed to give a reliable account of the impact on the UK economy.

Financial Securities

Ms Keeble: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about competition in the financial securities sector. [49370]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* To date, the Treasury has received 143 responses to its consultation document about proposals to benchmark Individual Savings Accounts, "Making Saving Easy". Some of these responses have raised competition issues.

Euro

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what expenditure on promoting the euro is planned for *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; [50422]

(2) what EU funding he has applied for to promote the euro in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [50354]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 15 July 1998]:* The Government's communication campaign on the euro is aimed not at promoting the euro but at ensuring that UK businesses are aware of the implications of the introduction of the single currency from 1 January 1999, and to provide them with the information they need.

To this end the Treasury Euro Preparations Unit has received Summer Supplementary Estimate provision of £7.5 million to help raise business awareness of the implications of the launch of the euro, and to provide business with practical help during 1998–99. No expenditure has been authorised beyond this.

To date the Commission has agreed to provide £21,000 from the Community funds towards the costs of the publication and distribution of the Treasury booklet "EMU: Practical Information for Business", published last July. We will continue to talk to the Commission about the scope for further help with our campaign for raising business awareness for 1 January 1999.

National Asset Register

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the assets identified in the National Asset Register which are located in the city of Norwich. [50823]

Mr. Darling: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 4 December 1997, *Official Report*, column 279.

The Government propose to consider, in the light of the reaction to the version published in November 1997, whether to produce further editions of the National Asset Register. As part of this exercise we will also consider what the appropriate level of detail of any future editions should be in the light of user's information needs and the cost implications of these.

SCOTLAND

Compulsory Purchase

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will consider the case for reform of the law and practice of compulsory purchase and blight in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [51646]

Mr. Macdonald: The Scottish Office is looking closely at the case for reform of Scots law and practice in this area. In addition to Scottish based work, there will be Scottish participation in the review of the general principles being undertaken by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. This will ensure that any proposals for legislative change will take the separate Scottish context fully into account. Such change for Scotland will, of course, be a matter for the Scottish Parliament to consider.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what has been the cost to public funds of expenses for Lord-Lieutenants in Scotland in each of the last 10 years. [50259]

Mr. McLeish: Expenditure incurred by The Scottish Office on Lord-Lieutenants' expenses in each of the last 10 years is set out. Some local authorities also support lieutenancy activities. Information on any costs incurred is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

£000

Year	*Amount*[1]
1988–89	9
1989–90	10
1990–91	10
1991–92	12
1992–93	13
1993–94	14
1994–95	25
1995–96	43
1996–97	27
1997–98	24

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest £1,000

[2] Includes the cost of changes to lieutenancy boundaries resulting from local government reorganisation

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Lord-Lieutenants currently serve Scotland. [50260]

Mr. McLeish: The number of Lord-Lieutenants currently serving Scotland is 35.

Scottish Office Expenditure

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will update tables 1.3 and 1.4 in Serving Scotland's Needs, published in April, to take account of changes in and projections of expenditure consequent on the Comprehensive Spending Review. [51050]

Mr. Dewar: Tables 1.3 and 1.4 were prepared in accordance with the previous public expenditure arrangements. The change in these arrangements announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1195–1201, has required some amendment to this form of presentation. The tables, therefore, present information updated to take account of the financial settlement for the financial years 1999–2000 to 2001–02, in the revised format. In accordance with normal practice, the tables have been rolled forward by one year.

Table 1—Scottish Office Budget Summary

£ million

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Departmental Expenditure Limit[1,2]	12,087	12,627	12,740	12,868	12,809	13,071	13,768	14,431	15,045
of which: capital expenditure	2,019	1,905	1,751	1,570	1,429	1,571	1,624	1,707	1,831
Annually Managed Expenditure									
CAP	243	285	347	419	324	345	300	282	309
Housing Support Grant	36	24	22	19	16	13	13	13	13
Total Assigned Budget[3]	12,366	12,936	13,110	13,306	13,148	13,429	14,080	14,726	15,367
New Deal for schools[4,5]	0	0	0	0	10	29	27	27	27
Non-Domestic Rates[6]	1,186	1,109	1,193	1,313	1,326	1,395	1,441	1,473	1,510
Total Budget[7]	13,552	14,045	14,303	14,619	14,484	14,853	15,548	16,225	16,904

Table 2—Scottish Office Budget Summary in real terms (1997–98 prices)

£ million

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Departmental Expenditure Limited[1,2]	13,330	13,718	13,468	13,215	12,809	12,703	13,041	13,336	13,564
of which: capital expenditure	2,227	2,069	1,851	1,612	1,429	1,526	1,538	1,578	1,651
Annually Managed Expenditure									
CAP	267	310	367	431	324	335	284	260	278
Housing Support Grant	40	26	23	20	16	12	12	12	11
Total Assigned Budget[3]	13,637	14,054	13,858	13,666	13,148	13,050	13,337	13,608	13,854
New Deal for schools[4]	0	0	0	0	10	29	25	25	24
Non-Domestic Rates[6]	1,308	1,205	1,261	1,348	1,326	1,356	1,365	1,361	1,362
Total Budget[7]	14,945	15,259	15,119	15,014	14,484	14,435	14,727	14,994	15,240

[1] Under the new public expenditure control arrangements and devolution, the Barnett formula used to determine Scottish expenditure applies to the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) in place of the former Scottish Block. Full details of the definitional changes between the DEL and the Control Total were given in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", published in June.

[2] Includes provision for the Crown Office, which will be within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament.

[3] Total budget assigned to the Scottish Parliament. There are some differences between the coverage of the Assigned Budget and the former Scottish Bloc, the main one being the exclusion of non-domestic rates. Figures here include expenditure on Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance of around £37 million per year which is included in the DEL but excluded from the Assigned Budget for control purposes until 1999–2000.

[4] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99.

[5] Total expenditure financed by the Windfall Tax and administered by the Scottish Office. The majority of expenditure on the New Deal is administered for all of Great Britain by DfEE and DSS. Total expenditure in Scotland on the New Deal is projected to be over £450 million in the period 1997–2002.

[6] Figures for future years uprated in line with the RPI.

[7] Total Scottish public spending within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament or administered by the Scottish Executive.

Table 3—Total Budget in cash terms

£ million

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Central Government support for:									
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	5,243	5,377	5,461	5,523	5,431	5,448	5,688	5,864	6,014
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure[2]	696	708	695	454	336	359	345	356	392
Other programme expenditure									
Agriculture, fisheries and food[3]	416	456	521	600	514	517	478	464	496
Arts, libraries and sport	59	76	75	79	86	77	80	82	84
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	695	825	876	906	941	914	1,013	1,070	1,136
Student support[4]	396	363	342	352	346	357	320	308	299
Health	3,776	3,948	4,092	4,237	4,354	4,624	4,924	5,214	5,534
Housing[5]	542	543	467	316	422	498	524	634	655
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	542	608	610	606	589	599	555	558	608
Law, order and protective services[7]	424	428	428	449	452	460	487	488	508
Crown Office	45	43	46	47	47	49	51	51	51
Other environmental services	76	83	99	408	336	328	323	325	327
Scottish Parliament and staff	0	0	0	0	0	0	55	80	47
Other Public Services	162	167	172	176	155	160	183	194	191
Roads and Transport[8]	308	264	249	265	242	245	267	270	282
Social Work	40	44	48	63	63	66	74	77	81
European Social Funds and European Regional Development Fund	132	114	121	136	161	123	153	163	173
New Deal for schools[9]	0	0	0	0	10	29	27	27	27
Total Budget	13,552	14,045	14,303	14,619	14,484	14,853	15,548	16,226	16,904

Table 4—Total Budget in real terms, 1997–98 prices

£ million

	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01	2001–02
Central Government support for:									
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	5,781	5,841	5,773	5,673	5,431	5,294	5,388	5,419	5,422
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure[2]	768	769	735	466	336	349	327	329	354
Other programme expenditure									
Agriculture, fisheries and food[3]	459	495	551	616	514	503	453	429	448
Arts, libraries and sport	65	82	79	81	86	75	76	76	76
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	766	896	926	931	941	888	959	989	1,024
Student support[4]	436	395	362	361	346	347	304	285	270
Health	4,165	4,289	4,326	4,352	4,354	4,494	4,664	4,818	4,989
Housing[5]	598	590	494	324	422	484	496	585	591
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	597	660	644	623	589	582	526	515	548
Law, order and protective services[7]	468	465	452	462	452	447	461	451	458
Crown Office	50	47	49	49	47	48	48	47	46
Other environmental services	84	90	105	419	336	318	306	300	294
Scottish Parliament and staff	0	0	0	0	0	0	52	74	42
Other Public Services	179	182	182	181	155	155	174	180	172
Roads and Transport[8]	339	287	263	272	242	238	253	250	254
Social Work	44	48	51	65	63	64	70	72	73
European Social Funds and European Regional Development Fund	146	124	128	140	161	119	145	151	156
New Deal for schools[9]	0	0	0	0	10	29	25	25	24
Total Budget	14,945	15,259	15,119	15,014	14,484	14,435	14,727	14,994	15,240

[1] Includes non-domestic rate payments, which are outside the DEL

[2] The requirement that local authorities must use 50 per cent. of non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt will be abolished from 1 August 1998. This will allow local authorities to raise an estimated £75 million per annum extra from asset sales

[3] Includes market support under the CAP, which is outside the DEL

[4] Reflects the new Resource Accounting treatment of student loans announced in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", hence it includes total expenditure on student grants, but only the subsidy element of student loans

[5] Expenditure funded through the Capital Receipts Initiative is now included in the DEL. Housing figures also include Housing Support Grant, which is outside the DEL

[6] This line covers Industry, enterprise and training expenditure administered by the Scottish Office only. Further expenditure administered by other departments on the New Deal is projected to be around £75 million in 1998–99, and almost £90 million per year in each of 1999–2000 to 2001–02

[7] A large proportion of spending on law, order and protective services is included under central government support to local authorities

[8] Includes support to nationalised industries

[9] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99. Additional support for schools' capital expenditure is included in support for non-housing local authority capital expenditure above

HOME DEPARTMENT

Probationary Prison Officers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the percentage of probationary prison officers in each young offender institution in England. [49874]

Ms Quin: A probationary prison officer is a newly appointed prison officer who is in the process of completing an initial 12 month probationary period, during which time he or she is required to achieve a satisfactory level of performance, conduct and attendance, prior to the appointment being confirmed. The information requested about probationary prison officers is given in the table for those Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) which are separate establishments. Where a YOI is co-located with an adult establishment, it is not possible to extrapolate this information.

Staff in first year probationary period at YOIs as at 8 July 1998

Young offender institution	Number on probation
Aylesbury	26
Brinsford	8
Castington	—
Deerbolt	—
Dover	—
Feltham	44
Glen Parva	23
Hatfield	—
Hindley	—
Lancaster Farms	4
Low Newton	—
Northallerton	—
Onley	5
Portland	—
Reading	4
Stoke Heath	27
Swinfen Hall	19
Thorn Cross	2
Werrington	4
Wetherby	—
Total	166

New Prisons

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what factors led him to reject the proposals for building a prison in Winwick, near Warrington. [50245]

Ms Quin: The decision not to acquire the site of Winwick Hospital for the construction of a new prison was reached on financial grounds. This decision does not remove the urgent need for additional prison places to serve the North West.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what factors led him to approve proposals to build a prison on a site at Ashworth Hospital, Maghull, Merseyside. [50317]

Ms Quin: There is an urgent need for additional prison places to serve Merseyside. The Ashworth Hospital south site is ideally located to meet this need. The site meets the Prison Service's criteria in respect of affordability, size, topography, communication links and availability of mains services, and on planning grounds is considered an appropriate site for development.

Prisons (Private Management)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the percentage of the Prison Service estate which will be privately managed by the year 2002; and if he will make a statement. [50592]

Ms Quin: By March 2002, the certified normal accommodation of the prison estate is forecast to be 67,700. Of these places, it is expected that 6,600 will be privately managed. Therefore the percentage of the Prison Service estate forecast to be privately managed by 2002 is 9.7 per cent.

Alternatively, another way of measuring the percentage of the estate expected to be privately managed is to look at numbers of prisons rather than sum of places. Current plans are for 143 prisons to be operating in March 2002. Of these, it is expected that 11 will be privately managed. The percentage of the Prison Service estate expected to be privately managed in 2002 using this forecast is 7.7 per cent.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the basis on which financial penalties imposed on contractors of privately managed prisons are calculated; and if he will make a statement. [50587]

Ms Quin: There are three financial remedies available to the Prison Service as a result of a contractor's non-performance under a contract for a Design, Construct, Manage and Finance (DCMF) prison. Fees may be withheld under the following circumstances:

i) if certain criteria for "available places" are not met. The criteria include levels of security, control of prisoners and physical requirements such as lighting and heating;

ii) a "penalty points" system, where non-compliance with performance measures specified in the contract leads to an award of pre-determined penalty points; and

iii) if the contractor holds more than a specified number of prisoners two to a cell.

For management only prisons (Blakenhurst, Buckley Hall, Doncaster and Wolds), reductions in payment may result from a performance measure procedure similar to the DCMF penalty points system, and as a result of deficiencies that fall outside the performance measures procedures.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the capital cost of each of the privately built prisons. [50586]

Ms Quin: The project costs for each of the privately built prisons are: Parc, £75m; Altcourse, £88m; Lowdham Grange, £32m; Pucklechurch, £36m; and Agecroft, £55m. The project costs include capital expenditure before the prison's opening and consist mainly of construction costs.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the calculations of the relative costs of privately and publicly managed prisons take into account the cost of *(a)* capital repayments and *(b)* interest charges on such payments to the relevant private sector company. [50585]

Ms Quin: Yes. The capital repayments by the contractor for Design, Construct, Manage and Finance prisons and the interest accruing were included in the costs of these prisons when compared with their closest public sector comparators. There are no comparable costs in non Private Finance Initiative procurement since payment is not amortised over a contract period.

Altcourse Prison

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the quality and level of service being delivered at HMP Altcourse following the recent Prison Service audit; when audits are planned to be undertaken into HMP Parc and HMP Lowdham Grange; and if he will make a statement. [50595]

Ms Quin: The audit of Altcourse prison, which took place in April 1998, detected some deficiencies in contract compliance but the performance of the prison overall has been satisfactory. A contract compliance audit of Parc prison took place during the week beginning 29 June and an operational audit in the week beginning 6 July. An audit of Lowdham Grange prison is planned for August 1998.

Prisoners (Medical Records)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements exist between the National Health Service and the Prison Service for mutual access to relevant medical records of prisoners during and after custody; and if he will make a statement. [50589]

Ms Quin: Prison healthcare staff are not required, as a matter of routine, to obtain the previous non-Prison Service medical records of all prisoners received into custody. Where it is considered necessary, and the patient prisoner agrees, staff will request medical reports or the individual health records from the National Health Service (NHS). In cases where there is a need for treatment to continue following release, medical information is transferred from the prison doctor to the prisoner's General Practitioner or other NHS doctor as required.

A new health care standard on "continuity of health care" is being developed by the Prison Service in collaboration with a number of agencies including the

NHS. This is aimed at facilitating the exchange of information and will provide additional advice and guidance to staff.

Prisoners (Protection)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were being kept in separate regimes for their protection, at their own request on the last date for which figures are available; and what were the equivalent figures in each of the last three years. [50594]

Ms Quin: Prisoners may be held on Prison Rule 43 and Young Offender Institution Rule 46 for their own protection, or may be held in vulnerable prisoner units separate from other prisoners without being placed on either Rule. Figures for the end of May 1998, the most recent available information, and for the same date in the three previous years are shown in the table.

Prisoners kept in separate regimes at their own request

Year	Prisoners on rule 43 and YOI rule 46 for their own protection	Prisoners in vulnerable prisoner units
1995	1,130	[1]—
1996	1,190	3,750
1997	850	4,010
1998	1,210	3,740

[1] Not available

Note:
Figures are provisional

Prisoners (Continous Assessment)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are currently under continuous assessment by the Prison Service; what arrangements are in place to ensure that prisoners are not released directly from long periods of continuous assessment into the community; and if he will make a statement. [50430]

Ms Quin: There are 20 prisoners on the continuous assessment scheme (CAS). There is a possibility that prisoners may be released directly into the community: however, wherever possible, prisoners are returned to normal prison conditions prior to release.

Prison Staff

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the full complement of each category of staff at *(a)* HMP Altcourse, *(b)* HMP Parc and *(c)* HMP Lowdham Grange; and how many staff are currently employed in each category. [50591]

Ms Quin: Each contractor categorises staff differently. Information for each prison is set out in the tables.

HMP Altcourse: staff complement

Job category	Complement on 13 July 1998	Numbers in post on 13 July 1998
Managers	43	49
Prisoner Custody Officers	174	171
Dog Handlers	27	27
Assistant Custody Officers	33	30
PT Assistant Custody Officers	—	23
Activity Officers	11	9
Administration	40	40
Chaplains	3	3
Maintenance	19	25

HMP Lowdham Grange: staff complement

Job category	Complement[1]	Number in post on 13 July 1998[1]
Director	1	1
Managers	11	10
Operations Managers	14.8	14
Prisoner Custody Officers	125.3	130
Operational Support	23.9	23
Other Support and Programmes Staff	23.9	23

[1] The decimal points are accounted for by relief calculations

HMP Parc: staff complement

Job title (category)	Complement on 10 July 1998	Number in post on 10 July 1998
Prisoner Custody Officer	192	160
Prisoner Custody Officer	33	38
Prisoner Custody Officer	14	11
Prisoner Custody Officer (non-permanent)	—	31
Prisoner Custody Officer (under training)	—	61
Non-operational staff, Senior managers, Administration and Support Staff	74	69

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of the staff at *(a)* HMP Altcourse and *(b)* HMP Parc, (i) resigned and (ii) have been dismissed in each of the last six months; what is the average annual staff turnover rate in publicly managed prisons; and if he will make a statement. [50596]

Ms Quin: The information required is set out in the table. The wastage rate in 1997–98 for all staff in public sector prisons was 6.76 per cent.

Staff resignations and dismissals at HMP Altcourse and HMP Parc

Percentage

1998	HMP Altcourse Resignations	HMP Altcourse Dismissals	HMP Parc Resignations	HMP Parc Dismissals
January	0.27	0.27	1.45	1.45
February	0	0.27	1.1	0.37
March	0.54	0	2.6	0
April	0.27	0.27	5	1
May	0.54	0.81	3.47	1.04
June	0.81	0.27	3.12	0

Prisons (Health Services)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had in relation to the

transfer of responsibility for health services in prisons to the National Health Service; and if he will make a statement. [50588]

Ms Quin: I receive regular reports about the progress of the Prison Service and National Health Service (NHS) joint working group on the future organisation of prison health care. This group is considering, among other options for improving prison health care, the transfer of responsibility to the NHS. The Government will announce their decision about whether or not this would be an appropriate way to proceed, once the working group has produced its report and we have had an opportunity to consider it.

Crimes (Motivation)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans there are for the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate to investigate the number of crimes committed based on *(a)* homophobia and *(b)* religious hatred; and if he will make a statement. [50602]

Mr. Michael: The Directorate is in the process of commissioning a study of religious discrimination which is intended to clarify the extent of overlap between religious and racial discriminations. Furthermore, the Directorate plans to publish a report later this year on the police racial incident figures. This will cover the kind of incidents (including those between different religious groups) which the police may record as being racially motivated).

From the information collected centrally, it is not possible to determine the number of offences or incidents of homophobic crime. The Home Office collects statistics on the number of recorded offences by categories which include violence against the person, indecent assault on a male, indecency between males and rape of a male. However, there is no way of identifying which offences had a homophobic element.

In 1996, the Association of Chief Police Officers published a set of Good Practice Guidelines for Dealing with Homophobic Incidents. This included a definition of what should be regarded as a homophobic incident:

"Any incident which appears to either the victim, investigating officer or any other person to be motivated by homophobia, that is animosity towards lesbians and gay men".

The guidelines also recommended that police forces should record and monitor such incidents.

Such information that is available on homophobic crime is contained in surveys. For example, in a survey of gay men carried out in Lewisham as part of the Lewisham Safer Cities project in 1992, the vast majority reported experience of verbal abuse (81 per cent.) and approaching half reported being attacked physically. Property offences were less commonly reported.

Stonewall, as an organisation which campaigns for the civil rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, has carried out a nationwide survey and key findings included:

three quarters reported experiencing verbal abuse on at least one occasion;

over a third of men and a quarter of women reported experiencing violence in the last five years because of their sexuality;

some groups, such as black, Asian, disabled and young respondents, had greater risk of victimisation.

Both studies found repeat victimisation was common. They provide useful information, although it must be acknowledged that they may not provide a representative sample.

With regard to crimes connected to religious hatred, most such crimes are likely also to have an element of racial hatred. As such, they will fall within the very wide definition of a racial incident first adopted by the police in 1985:

"Any incident in which it appears to the reporting or investigating officer that the complaint involves an element of racial motivation; or any incident which includes an allegation of racial motivation made by any person".

In prosecutions of crimes with a racial element under existing legislation, an element of racial motivation may be treated as an aggravating factor by the courts at the point of sentencing. The Crime and Disorder Bill [*Lords*] also makes provision for a set of new, specific racially aggravated offences, where the maximum sentence exceeds that for their non-racially motivated equivalent. In addition, my right hon. Friend, during the Report stage of the Bill, undertook to monitor charges and sentences in areas where there is intercommunal violence between religious and racial groups, to ensure that the provisions do not unduly favour one group.

Prisoners (Consultation Costs)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the cost of each public relations exercise and consultation process in relation to the opening of new prisons in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [50590]

Ms Quin: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, the Prison Service's consultation costs in respect of its recent decision to build a new prison on the site of the former remand centre at Ashford, Middlesex, are estimated at £23,000. It would not be unreasonable to assume that other new prison projects involving the same amount of consultation would incur similar costs.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to speed up the process of payment by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board. [50654]

Mr. Michael: The criminal injuries compensation system was speeded up by the introduction, with effect from 1 April 1996, of a tariff-based scheme operated by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority in place of the scheme based on common law damages administered by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB). Current indications are that the tariff approach enables some 85 per cent. of claims to be decided within 12 months of receipt, in comparison with 60 per cent. under the former scheme; and 80 per cent. of appeals are dealt with within six months instead of the indicative waiting time of two years applicable to most CICB hearings.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much specialised training in man days was provided to Metropolitan Police officers of each rank in respect of *(a)* murder inquiries and *(b)* racial incidents in the last year for which figures are available. [50664]

Mr. Michael: Training in the Metropolitan Police Service is an operational matter for the Commissioner. The Commissioner tells me that the Metropolitan Police Service does provide training to officers in respect of murder inquiries. This training is provided at a number of levels and through different courses. The most significant of these is the Management of Serious Crimes Course and the Detective Constables Course (the latter was introduced on 31 March 1998).

The total number of officers on these courses between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998 were:

Constables: 108

Sergeants: 15

Inspectors: 81

Chief Inspectors: 11.

Elements of Community and Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Training are included in the majority of all training delivered to officers at all levels.

The Commissioner has recently appointed Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Grieve to head the next phase of reform of police racial awareness training and police investigation of racial and violent crime.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the projected change in funding per Metropolitan Police officer consequent on the proposed boundary changes if current arrangements for central Government funding and precepting remain unchanged; [50662]

(2) what will be *(a)* the percentage change in the number of Metropolitan Police officers and *(b)* the percentage change in the financial contribution of precepting authorities under the proposed redrawing of Metropolitan Police boundaries. [50663]

Mr. Michael: The proposed changes to the boundaries of the Metropolitan Police will lead to some re-distribution of existing resources, including police officers, but it is too early to give precise estimates.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the projected change in the number of Metropolitan Police officers in (i) 2000 and (ii) 2005 on present trends of recruitment and wastage. [50660]

Mr. Michael: It is for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to determine what number of officers will be required to police the capital.

In making this assessment, the Commissioner will consider all the demands on the finances available to him in order to provide an efficient and effective service, while ensuring best value is achieved.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government propose to assist the Metropolitan Police in its recruitment. [50659]

Mr. Michael: It is a matter for the Commissioner to determine what proportion of the funding of the Metropolitan Police Service is used in the recruitment of its officers.

The Commissioner informs me that, in common with other employers in the South East, the police are having to work hard to attract suitable staff, but that two national recruitment campaigns are being run this year.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the quarterly totals for the last three years of the number of *(a)* officers leaving the Metropolitan Police service or retiring, *(b)* people applying to join the Metropolitan Police and *(c)* people accepted as recruits into the Metropolitan Police. [50661]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner has provided the following information:

(a) Officers leaving the Metropolitan Police service or retiring

Year	First quarter	Second quarter	Third quarter	Fourth quarter	Total
1995–96	286	344	334	331	1,295
1996–97	333	338	392	365	1,428
1997–98	388	368	395	436	1,587

(b) Those applying to join the Metropolitan Police:

Year	Number
1995–96	7,208
1996–97	3,941
1997–98	4,633

(c) Those accepted as recruits into the Metropolitan Police:

Year	Number
1995–96	1,208
1996–97	692
1997–98	1,185

The Commissioner tells me that, as applications and subsequent acceptances may take place in different quarters, a breakdown by quarters is not possible.

Child Protection

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further plans he has to tackle the issue of preventing unsuitable people from working with children and to protect young people from abuse by those in positions of trust following the debate on lowering the age of consent from 18 to 16 years on 22 June; and if he will make a statement. [51727]

Mr. Michael: During the debate on 22 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 709–811, I referred to the interdepartmental working group set up to look as a matter of priority at further safeguards needed to prevent those unsuitable from working with children and to protect young people from abuse by those in positions of trust. The group is due to meet on 30 July.

The need to protect vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds from abuse of trust was discussed at length in the debate on 22 June. The working group will look carefully at the concerns expressed. Issues to be considered will include:

the definition of a position of trust; the scope of occupations to be covered; the definition of those to be protected; the kind of behaviour to be prohibited; existing safeguards and possible new mechanisms for prohibiting such behaviour, including a possible new criminal offence. Any proposals will relate to the need to protect both boys and girls and will take account of issues such as avoiding the criminalisation of the younger partner in a relationship based on abuse of trust.

On the issue of preventing those unsuitable from working with children, the working group's programme of work will include: how working with children can be defined; how to define those unsuitable to work with children; existing and potential safeguards to prevent unsuitable people working with children; a possible new offence to support the safeguards; and the possible establishment of a central register of those unsuitable to work with children, including questions of quality assurance, access, scope and cost.

The working group will also take into account the report of Sir William Utting's review of safeguards for children living away from home and the Government's response to this review which is expected to be published by the Ministerial Task Force later this year. In particular, consideration will be given to those recommendations dealing with choosing the right staff.

The working group, which will be led by the Home Office, will hold regular meetings during the autumn and is tasked to make recommendations by the end of December. Other Departments involved include: the Department for Education and Employment; the Department of Health; the Welsh Office; the Charity Commission; the Crown Prosecution Service; and the Lord Chancellor's Department. This group will also look at how best to involve outside organisations in the work. The group's recommendations will relate to England and Wales, but representatives from the Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices will also be involved.

Telephone Interceptions

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *588*, what factors underlie the trends in the numbers of warrants approved; and if he will make a statement. [50932]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the Annual Report of the Interception of Communications Commissioner for 1996 (Cm 3678) in which, at paragraph 10, he gives an explanation for the increase in the number of interception warrants issued. The Commissioner's report for 1997 will be published shortly.

Police Recruits

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he proposes to increase the number of police officer recruits. [51042]

Mr. Michael: Ministers have no direct control over police numbers. Under legislation passed by the previous Government in 1994, it is for individual chief constables to determine the number of police officers in their force within the total resources available to them.

Under the Government's spending plans, which were announced on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, up to £1.24 billion in additional funds over 1998–99 levels will be available to police forces in England and Wales over the next three years. This settlement, along with savings from the 2 per cent. year-on-year efficiency improvements which police forces will be asked to achieve, will ensure that more resources are focused on the front-line against crime.

Prisons (North-west)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons in the North West which are to be re-categorised in the next few years; and if he will make a statement. [50969]

Ms Quin: The only planned re-categorisation of prisons in the North West is for the removal of females from Risley prison, to allow it to become a dedicated male establishment.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in the North West contain detoxification units. [50967]

Mr. George Howarth: There are no specialist drug detoxification units in prisons in the north west as yet. However, the Prison Service has now provided funding for the establishment of a drug detoxification and rehabilitation centre at Risley prison, to be set up in October.

Where a drug detoxification unit is not available, all establishments should be able to provide prisoners with detoxification where needed. Many can be treated on normal location or in the prison health care centre. Where necessary prisoners can be transferred to establishments with specialist detoxification units.

Wymott Prison

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on relations between the Governor and prison staff at HMP Wymott. [50968]

Ms Quin: The governor at Wymott prison considers that relations between him and his staff are satisfactory, after some difficulties over the introduction of new working practices on 21 June. He is working closely with the local branch of the Prison Officers' Association to resolve outstanding areas of concern.

Firearms

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims for compensation under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 remain outstanding in respect of the Thames Valley Police Force area. [50936]

Mr. Michael: There are currently 1,066 claims from the Thames Valley Police Force area where payment has not yet been made under Option C of the compensation scheme, the great majority of which have already received a payment under Options A or B. In 28 of these cases, a payment offer has been made and is awaiting acceptance

by the claimant. There are also a few claims with an Option A or B element outstanding, pending the completion of inquiries from the claimant or the police.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Lord-Lieutenants currently serve England. [50262]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of Lord-Lieutenants currently serving England is 45. (The position of Lord-Lieutenant of the County of Devon is at present vacant).

Prisons (Suicides)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the ratio of the number of suicides to inmates in prisons in England and Wales, in each of the last three years, *(a)* by gender and *(b)* in total; what discussions he has had with the Scottish Office concerning the prevention of suicides in prisons; and if he will make a statement. [50599]

Ms Quin: The information requested is given in the tables. Officials in the Prison Service for Scotland have with their counterparts in England and Wales discussed strategies on caring for the suicidal in custody. My hon. Friend the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office, recently announced a package of strategic measures, which add to and complement the recently introduced Scottish Prison Service Suicide Risk Management Strategy. The measures include the setting up of a task force to examine in detail all the circumstances surrounding the deaths in prison custody in Scotland this year to identify any common factors and lessons to be learned. A member of the Prison Service for England and Wales Suicide Awareness Support Group will form part of the task force, which I understand will report to Ministers later this year.

Self-inflicted deaths among male and female prisoners held in prison establishments in England and Wales 1995–1997 and the rate of self-inflicted deaths per 100,000 annual average population

Year	*Number of self-inflicted deaths*	*Rate per 100,000 annual average population*
Male prisoners		
1995	57	116
1996	62	117
1997	67	115
Female prisoners		
1995	2	101
1996	2	88
1997	3	112

Year	*Total self-inflicted deaths*	*Rate per 100,000 annual average population*
All prisoners		
1995	59	116
1996	64	116
1997	70	115

HEALTH

NHS Trusts (Administration Charges)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the *(a)* highest, average and lowest lump sum administration charges and *(b)* highest, average and lowest photocopying charges per sheet charged by NHS trusts administering general hospitals for access to medical records; and if he will make a statement. [43288]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not held centrally and could be collected only at a disproportionate cost. However, the Access to Health Records Act 1990 requires that charges should not exceed the cost of making a copy and posting it, and guidance to National Health Service organisations has made it quite clear that the actual cost is the maximum that should be charged. The actual cost will differ from case to case and can only be determined by the specific organisation involved. Recommending a charge greater than the actual cost in any particular case would contravene the requirements of the Act, and recommending charges consistently lower than actual costs would increase NHS costs. Therefore, the responsibility for determining reasonable charges must remain with individual organisations.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has approved the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's Fourth Code of Practice. [51617]

Ms Jowell: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's revised Code of Practice has been approved and was laid before the House today. Copies of the Code have been placed in the Library.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to respond to the request for financial assistance for people with haemophilia who are infected with hepatitis C as a result of their NHS treatment. [50477]

Ms Jowell: We will be responding as soon as we are in a position to do so.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Millennium Volunteers

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will launch the Millennium Volunteers Scheme. [51051]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Millennium Volunteers demonstration projects are being set up currently with local delivery bodies in eight locations in England, and we will be publishing a guide which invites organisations to apply for funding after the summer.

Tuition Fees

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the NUS Scotland will be represented on the independent review body to be set up to examine how the Government's proposals for the Scottish fourth year exemption are working. [51045]

Dr. Howells: We shall announce as soon as possible details of the independent body that is to review the arrangements for fee support for students in the final honours year of first-degree courses at higher education institutions in Scotland. The bodies invited to make representations will include the full range of interests, including students. It will also be open to other bodies and individuals to make representations.

Mathematics Teachers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he will take to increase the number of available mathematics teachers. [51041]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are determined to raise standards in schools, and good quality teachers—in both phases and all subjects—have an essential role to play in helping us achieve our plans. Maintaining teacher supply is a key challenge facing the Government and the education system. We are working with our partners—the Teacher Training Agency, higher education institutions, schools and others—to meet that challenge. Our response of 29 January to the Education and Employment Select Committee set out the measures we have taken to date.

We have already announced that all students studying to achieve a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education will not have to contribute to tuition fees; and 83 per cent. of mathematics training places are on PGCE courses. In addition, the Teacher Training Agency will provide, through the Secondary Shortage Subject Scheme some £12 million in the coming year to support those in need who wish to train to teach in such subjects, including mathematics. The new employment-based routes to qualified teacher status, aimed at enabling more mature candidates to enter teaching, also will help to boost recruitment.

Beacon Schools

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultation took place on the establishment of beacon schools; and what responses were received. [50951]

Mr. Byers: The beacon school initiative was developed in discussion with the Standards Task Force and through consultation with those schools identified by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector as the best performing during 1996–97.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Licences

Mr. Paice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the number of export licences *(a)* applied for and *(b)* granted for the supply of aircraft parts for each of the last five years together with the average time taken by her Department to resolve the application; and what is the target time which her Department now endeavours to achieve. [49180]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* Entry ML10 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 controls the export of specified aircraft, unmanned airborne vehicles, aero-engines and aircraft equipment, and related goods and components, specially designed or modified for military use. A large number of other entries in the export control legislation may also control the export of aircraft-related equipment. The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and the following results were obtained:

Between 1 January 1994 and 12 June 1998, 7,905 applications for Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 474 applications for Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) covering the export of goods with the rating ML10 were received. In the same period, 7,194 SIELs and 370 OIELs were issued covering such exports.

Number of applications for individual licences received, and individual licences issued, in each calendar year covering the export of goods with the rating ML10

		SIELs		*OIELs*
Year	*Applications received*	*Licences issued*	*Applications received*	*Licences issued*
1994	2,177	2,142	41	36
1995	1,644	1,415	27	25
1996	1,622	1,471	201	175
1997	1,689	1,420	104	79
1998 (to 12 June)	773	746	101	55

This information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend, the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), on 30 October 1997, *Official Report,* columns *870–71.*

Aircraft parts may also have been exported during this period under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

As regards performance targets and the average time taken to process the applications referred to above, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the President of the Board of Trade on 24 November 1997 to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 24 November 1997, *Official Report,* column *416.*

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many applications for licences for the export of *(a)* paramilitary, *(b)* security and *(c)* police equipment to Guinea Bissau have been (i) granted, (ii) refused and (iii) revoked, (1) between February 1995 and May 1997 inclusive and (2) since May 1997; and what was the export licence category in each case. [49346]

Mrs. Roche: The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained:

Between 1 February 1995 and 1 May 1997 one Standard Individual Export Licence was issued covering the export to Guinea-Bissau of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List. This licence covered goods whose export is controlled under entry PL5018 of the Military List.

No other Standard or Open Individual Export Licences covering such exports were issued or revoked, and no applications refused for such licences, in that period or in the period between 2 May 1997 and 12 June 1998.

This information does not cover any Media OIELS that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELS are Open Individual Export Licences that authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–871*.

It is not possible to break down these data in the manner requested, as the equipment covered by many entries in the Military List could be used by military, paramilitary, or police end-users.

Goods on the Military List may have been exported to Guinea-Bissau under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the export licences issued by her Department for military equipment to Sri Lanka during the last 12 months. [49691]

Mrs. Roche: The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and the following results were obtained:

Between 13 June 1997 and 12 June 1998, 68 individual licences were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Sri Lanka of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List. Sixty-five Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs), and 3 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs). The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issues between 13 June 1997 and 12 June 1998 covering the export to Sri Lanka of goods on the military list

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML1	16	0
ML2	4	0
ML3	7	0
ML4	8	0
ML5	1	0
ML6	1	0
ML7	1	0
ML10	2	2
ML11	21	1
ML14	1	0
ML15	2	0
ML21	1	0
ML22	1	0
PL5001	1	0
PL5017	1	0

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

In addition, goods on the Military List may have been exported to Sri Lanka under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at that time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mr. Breed: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many Small Firms Loan Guarantees have been provided by Government in each of the last 10 years and for what amounts. [49311]

Mrs. Roche: The number and value of loans guaranteed under the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme in each of the last ten years were:

Year	*Loans guaranteed*	*Value (£ million)*
1988–89	2,266	63.6
1989–90	3,204	99.4
1990–91	3,387	84.6
1991–92	2,933	69.5
1992–93	2,342	52.0
1993–94	3,886	155.0
1994–95	6,207	246.0
1995–96	7,484	275.4
1996–97	6,942	255.8
1997–98	5,081	201.3

Mr. Breed: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) if she will list the write-offs under the small firms loan guarantee scheme by number and amount in each of the last 10 years; [50375]

(2) how many small firms loan guarantees have been provided by the Government in each of the last 10 years; and how much money has been allocated in total. [50374]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him on 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 631.

Post Office

Mr. Bayley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement about the External Financing Limit of the Post Office. [51643]

Mrs. Beckett: External Financing Limits of −£335 million for each of the years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 have been set. This is an interim measure pending the outcome of the current Post Office review. The Government hope to announce their proposals in the Autumn.

British Nuclear Fuels Ltd.

Mr. Andy King: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement about the External Financing Limit of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. [51644]

Mrs. Beckett: External Financing Limits of £25 million for 1999–2000, -£75 million for 2000–01 and –£150 million for 2001–02 have been set. These reflect expected improvements in efficiency and expected savings from the integration of BNFL and Magnox.

Oil and Gas Royalties

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current oil and gas royalties system. [49967]

Mr. Battle: The Petroleum (Production) Act 1934 empowers the Crown to receive royalties arising from oil and gas under the soil. These onshore rights were extended offshore in 1964. Royalty, at a rate of 12½ per cent. of the value of petroleum won and saved (less an allowance for eligible conveying and treating costs), is currently payable only in respect of production from fields for which development consent was given before April 1982.

In his 1998 Budget, on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1097–112, the Chancellor announced that the Government would formally consult the oil industry on specific proposals to change the fiscal regime for companies involved in the extraction of UK oil and gas. The Government intend shortly to issue a consultative document on the North Sea fiscal regime. An outline of the options for change has already been published in an Inland Revenue press release issued on Budget Day. As explained in that press release, one of the options is the abolition of oil and gas royalty. This option is intended to encourage companies to exploit more fully the reserves of older oil and gas fields, and responds to representations made by some companies.

Companies House

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the current staff who exceed the proposed requirements of Companies House, following its relocation, will be re-employed within her Department. [49972]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Staff in Companies House can and will continue to be able to apply for posts in the Department of Trade and Industry, and will be considered for appointment if they are suitably qualified.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she has taken to ensure that the relocation and rationalisation of Companies House in 1999 will not result in a reduced level of service. [49966]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The move of the Companies House London office to new premises at the end of 1998 will coincide with the introduction of new facilities for the on-line electronic delivery of information. The existing premium and standard microfiche service will continue to be provided until the current office closes in Autumn 1999. Alternative arrangements for those customers who continue to want to use microfiche will then be available from the Cardiff office, although it will not be possible to provide the current speed of service. I am confident, however, that the new facilities, offering a combination of traditional microfiche and newer electronic services, will lead to an improved service overall for customers.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of the current staff are expected still to be employed within Companies House *(a)* immediately, *(b)* six months and *(c)* a year after the relocation. [49970]

Mr. Ian McCartney: There will be no change now, or in six months' time, in the numbers of staff employed in Companies House, London as a result of the initial relocation of the office. The numbers are expected to have fallen by about 75 per cent. one year after relocation.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many staff will be made redundant or encouraged to take early retirement when the City Road premises of Companies House are closed. [49971]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Companies House will endeavour to help those staff not required at its new office to secure employment elsewhere, whether within the Civil Service or outside. It is not possible now to say how many staff will be found new jobs or how many will prefer to take early retirement or how many might be made redundant. One third of current staff in London are employed on a fixed terms or casual basis in anticipation of the change in the numbers required.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Angola

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action Her Majesty's Government have taken over the UNITA office in the United Kingdom to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1127 (1997). [50448]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: UNITA's representative in the United Kingdom conducted UNITA business from his commercial premises in London. Following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1127 (1997), Mr. Kandeya was immediately ordered to leave the United Kingdom. He has submitted an application to remain in the United Kingdom which is being considered by the Home Office. Officials have visited Mr. Kandeya's commercial premises and satisfied themselves that there was no sign of any continuing association with UNITA. As far as we are aware, there are no offices or premises being maintained in the United Kingdom under the name of UNITA.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken over the funds and financial resources of UNITA and senior UNITA personnel in the United Kingdom to comply with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1173 (1998). [50449]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government have prepared Orders in Council to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1173, which it expects to be laid before Parliament on 22 July and enter into force on 23 July. When it is passed, the Bank of England will simultaneously write to the relevant UK financial institutions asking them to implement the United Nations' financial sanctions against UNITA.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to prohibit the direct or indirect

import from Angola to the United Kingdom of diamonds that are not controlled through the Certificate of Origin regime of the GURN. [50450]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade proposes to amend the Open General Import Licence once the proposed Certificate of Origin Scheme has been finalised by the Angolan Government.

The Government have prepared orders in Council to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1173 which it expects to be laid before Parliament on 22 July and to enter into force on 23 July.

Torture Equipment

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) of 4 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *300*, on torture equipment, what progress was made during the UK presidency of the European Union in encouraging member countries to introduce similar restrictions on the export of torture equipment to those introduced in the United Kingdom by the Government on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*. [50724]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have pressed our EU partners vigorously on this issue, culminating in a formal invitation to join the United Kingdom in announcing bans on the export of the same equipment as in the announcement of 28 July 1997.

Our partners are sympathetic to our concerns. Indeed, in defining internal repression, the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports agreed on 8 June 1998 specifically includes torture or other cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment or punishment among the actions which constitute internal repression.

But some of our partners have doubts about the practicality and desirability of an outright ban. Many do not have national controls on some or all of the items involved. We believe from our contacts that there is support for the principle of controlling the export of such equipment.

As this equipment is not military equipment, matters relating to export controls fall within the Community's exclusive competence and it is for the Commission to make any proposal for a regulation establishing common rules. We are encouraging the European Commission to come forward with a proposal.

In the meantime, in the absence of an agreed EU position, it would be premature to press for global action. In due course, we would aim to press for such action to mirror the action that the EC decides to take.

The UK's national policy will be unaffected. Notifications of any licences denied under this ban will be issued to our partners under the denial notification arrangements agreed under the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Sudan

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the objectives of the Minister of State's four day mission to discuss issues affecting Sudan. [50944]

Mr. Fatchett: The reports of the suffering in southern Sudan shocked us all. I have just returned from Nairobi and Khartoum, where my objective was to bring about a break in the fighting in southern Sudan. A temporary truce in the most hunger-affected areas will be essential if the Sudanese people are to be able to start rebuilding their lives.

I am pleased to be able to say that the Government of Sudan and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), have agreed to a 3 month ceasefire in Bahr al Ghazal. This is encouraging news for the people of southern Sudan. I hope that we can now build on this important step and work together with IGAD for a wider peace.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 20 July 1998

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49830]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Action Zones

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the initiatives undertaken by his Department since 1 May 1997 which have involved the establishment of *(a)* action zones and *(b)* pilot schemes limited to particular geographical areas, indicating the name of the programme and the action zone or pilot scheme areas covered in each instance. [47051]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No initiatives have been undertaken by my Department since 1 May 1997 which have resulted in the establishment of action zones. Regarding the establishment of pilot schemes, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *135–36*.

Prior Options Reviews

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on 8 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *310*, if the same options are applied to public sector research establishments included within the scope of the review. [49974]

Dr. David Clark: Yes. The prior options reviews of public sector research establishments must thoroughly examine the same options that are applied during reviews of Next Steps agencies and agency candidates generally: abolition; privatisation; contracting out; market testing; rationalisation or merger with other areas of government; and agency or NDPB status. In looking at whether the function is required, prior option reviews of public sector research establishments will consider the underlying question of the country's scientific needs in that area. As with all prior options reviews, there is no presupposition that any outcome is more favoured than another. The decision on future status is made with the aim of achieving the most appropriate and cost effective way of carrying out the functions so as to deliver best value for money and best service.

Small Businesses

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what measures he has put in place to ensure that small businesses can complete all their licensing requirements and inform themselves about relevant regulation in one office. [50015]

Dr. David Clark: The Access Business Group, chaired by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, aims to make the regulatory system more transparent, accessible and helpful. The Group is also looking at the provision of integrated information, advice and guidance to ease the burden on business. The use of Information Technology to help businesses fulfil their obligation is part of this work.

In December, I launched the "intelligent" form which enables people to register as self-employed at a bank. This model has now been extended with the launch of the Post Office-led "Open for Business" pilot which enables people to register as self-employed in a post office, library, a community based "telecottage" or local government office. The "intelligent" form is just the start. The system proves the technology and we should eventually have electronic forms for people to apply for licences.

Lobbyists

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*, what was the nature of the representations received from *(a)* the Minister without Portfolio and *(b)* the Secretary of State for the Home Department. [51159]

Dr. David Clark: Internal discussions between Ministers on policy issues are confidential under the terms of Exemption 2 of the *Code of Practice on Access to Government Information*.

People's Panel

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *337*, on the People's Panel, how many waves of research the Government plan to commission. [51302]

Dr. David Clark: The Cabinet Office plans to commission a second wave of research later in the year. Plans for subsequent waves of research are being discussed with other government departments.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Cann: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when the Government response to the second report of the Science and Technology Committee "The Year 2000—Computer Compliance" [HC342] will be published. [51804]

Dr. David Clark: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade and I have today laid before Parliament the Government Response as Command Paper 3944.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50686]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office is currently collating information on the performance of the main government departments and agencies in responding to letters from MPs and the general public. This includes information on the volume of correspondence received, the target for responding to such letters, and performance against the target. It will be made available to House.

Information will not be included on the number of staff employed to answer letters as very few are employed solely in handling correspondence: in most cases correspondence is handled by staff across Whitehall as part of their normal duties.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is her Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48663]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Orange Parades

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Orange parades have been re-routed in Portadown since 1985. [49520]

Marjorie Mowlam: The following table shows the number of Orange parades re-routed in Portadown since 1990. The information prior to that year is not readily available.

Year	*Total*	*Illegal*	*Re-routed*	*Conditions imposed*	*Disorder occurred*
1990	85	—	6	3	—
1991	61	—	4	—	—
1992	69	—	4	—	—
1993	58	—	3	—	—
1994	55	—	6	—	—
1995	80	—	5	—	1
1996	68	1	1	—	1
1997	72	—	5	—	—

Railways

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the *(a)* forecast cost and *(b)* planned completion date of improvements to the section of the railway line between Lisburn and Belfast. [50136]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Work on Phase 1 of the Belfast-Lisburn rail upgrade, ie, the line between Great Victoria Street junction and Lisburn, which commenced in March, will be completed by 31 December 1998. Work on Phase 2 between Belfast Central Station and Belfast City junction will commence in spring 1999 and is likely to be completed mid year. The total cost of the project is estimated at £16.1m.

Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if land will be included in the list of goods, facilities and services in the Government's proposals to amend the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989. [51306]

Mr. Ingram: The White paper "Partnership for Equality" indicated that Fair Employment legislation would be extended to cover goods, facilities and services and the disposal or management of premises. Premises includes land. Views were sought on possible exceptions within areas such as housing and land and comments received are still being considered.

Equality Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many of those organisations replying to the White Paper, "Partnership for Equality" *(a)* explicitly supported the establishment of a single Equality Commission and *(b)* did not mention it in their submission. [51308]

Mr. Worthington: In total there were 123 responses to the White Paper "Partnership for Equality" and of those 29 or 23 per cent. supported the establishment of a single Equality Commission and 24 or 20 per cent. did not mention it.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the current annual costs and manpower of those bodies which it is intended to absorb into the Equality Commission. [51309]

Mr. Ingram: The current annual cost of the Fair Employment Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland and the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland is £4.8m. The staffing complement of these bodies is 117 full-time equivalents. The Northern Ireland Disability Council has an annual cost of £100,000 and no staff.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Older People

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what evaluation her Department has made of the impact of the European Court of Justice decision in respect of unauthorised spending by the Commission on measures in favour of older people. [45422]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 June 1998]:* No evaluation is required. The European Court of Justice decision (C106/96) given on 12 May was in respect of unlawful expenditure by the European Commission on projects to combat social exclusion. The Court agreed with the UK that whilst the payments had been illegal, the projects should be allowed to retain the money they had received.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has responsibility for the UK challenge against Commission expenditure on measures in favour of older people (C239/96). A date for the oral hearing is awaited.

Independent Tribunal Service

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will set a maximum target for the time within which the Independent Tribunal Service has to respond to requests for statements explaining tribunals' findings on questions of fact and the reasons underlying their decisions; and if she will make a statement. [48815]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the appeal system is a matter for His Honour Judge Michael Harris, the President of the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS). Tribunal chairmen provide statements explaining tribunals' findings on questions of fact and the reasons underlying their decisions. I understand the Chief Executive of the ITS has written to the hon. Member asking for more information and that the President will reply in more detail in due course.

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public. [48976]

Mr. Field: The Department and its Agencies aim to reply to all correspondence from members of the public within 20 days. Although performance is monitored, the information is not available in the format requested. I refer the hon. Member to the written answer from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans her Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49895]

Mr. Field: *[holding answer Monday 13 July 1998]:* This Department provides a wide range of information through a variety of means, including electronic. We have a website on the Internet which contains Social Security information such as benefits and Green Papers and an E-mail box for Ministerial correspondence.

We are actively looking at ways members of the public can deal electronically with the Department, with respect to benefit claims.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*.

State Pension

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the rate of return on the lifetime National Insurance contributions of *(a)* a man aged 65 and *(b)* a woman aged 60 retiring in the current financial year and receiving a full basic state pension. [48972]

Mr. Denham: The Government Actuary's Department estimates that the real rate of return on lifetime National Insurance contributions for someone reaching State Pension Age in 1998 would be 1.1 per cent. for a man aged 65 and 4.0 per cent for a woman aged 60.

Notes:

1. The following assumptions have been made:

   The man/woman is single and has been in employment throughout his/her working life from age 16. Juvenile rates of contributions have been used where appropriate. For the period covered by the Graduated Pension scheme and subsequently, the individual is assumed to receive constant full time average earnings. The amount of Retirement Pension (RP) payable includes Graduated Pension and SERPS on a not contracted out basis.

   The contributions are based on total National Insurance (NI) contributions (excluding any NHS Allocation or other elements), employer plus employee. It has been assumed that this total relates solely to RP entitlement. In practice NI contributions cover other benefits (e.g. Incapacity Benefit, Widows Benefit, and in the past Industrial Injuries benefit) in addition to RP.

   The value of the pension received has been based on mortality rates for a man reaching 65 and a woman reaching 60 in 1998 derived from the 1996 based population projection.

   The rate of return quoted in the reply represents a real rate of return, after adjusting for inflation (as measured by the Retail Prices Index).

2. The rate of return for a married man whose wife is receiving a married woman's (category B) pension would be higher than the figure quoted for a single male.

Pensioners (Christmas Bonus)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the cost of uprating to 1998 prices the £10 Christmas bonus as originally introduced on the basis of providing it *(a)* to all pensioners, *(b)* to pensioners other than higher rate taxpayers and *(c)* to pensioners other than standard and higher rate taxpayers. [49954]

Mr. Denham: The estimated cost of uprating the £10 Christmas bonus to 1998 prices on the basis of providing it to:

	£ million
(a) All pensioners	700
(b) Pensioners other than higher rate taxpayers	700
(c) Pensioners other than basic and higher rate taxpayers	600
(d) Pensioners other than lower, basic and higher rate taxpayers	450

Notes:

1. All figures in 1998–99 prices and rounded to the nearest £50 million.
2. The uprated levels of Christmas Bonus were calculated using the Retail Prices Index (All items). The value of the bonus has been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating.
3. Estimates for the number of pensioners who pay tax were provided by Inland Revenue (IR), although it is not possible to determine whether a particular individual is a higher rate or basic rate taxpayer for the relevant year at the time the Christmas Bonus is paid. Due to the fact that in sections *(b)*-*(d)*, the rounded estimates provided by IR were applied to the total extra cost, the figures should be treated with a degree of caution.

Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims for industrial injuries disablement benefit for each of the last three years were made by officials or employees or former officials or

employees of *(a)* Government or Government agencies, *(b)* the NHS, *(c)* local government or local government agencies and *(d)* the private sector. [50628]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available. Information is available only on the employment status of people receiving Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and is collected by the Standard Industrial Classification on Economic Activity relevant to the employment they were in at the time the injury occurred or the prescribed disease was contracted. Such information as is available is set out in the tables.

Total number of claims to industrial injuries disablement benefit

Period	*Claims*
April 1995-March 1996	72,990
April 1996-March 1997	70,640
April 1997-March 1998	96,350

Numbers of new awards to industrial injuries disablement benefit by industry type

Industry	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Agriculture, hunting and forestry	380	334	271
Fishing	24	36	—
Mining and quarrying	1,250	1,246	2,386
Manufacturing	6,501	7,727	7,752
Electricity, gas and water supply	307	272	354
Construction	3,147	2,333	2,639
Wholesale and retail trade	2,063	1,559	2,087
Hotels and restaurants	641	647	690
Transport, storage and communication	2,991	2,576	3,342
Financial inte mediation	189	140	74
Real estate, renting and business activities	1,160	1,137	1,454
Public admin. and defence; compulsory social security	1,639	1,590	2,455
Education	309	267	315
Health and social work	2,635	2,400	2,777
Other community, social and personal activities	735	684	949
Private households with employed persons	95	72	104
Total	24,067	23,019	27,650

Note:

The data are an estimate based on a 10 per cent. sample of claims and awards provided by DSS Analytical Services Data. In a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 25 November 1997, *Official Report*, columns *531–32*, we gave details of total claims for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and new awards based on DSS Central Data Unit data (based on 100 per cent. of all claims and awards). A breakdown of the data into industry type is available only from the 10 per cent. sample data

Child Benefit

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the factors underlying delays in issuing child benefit payment books. [49219]

Mr. Worthington: I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Chris Thompson, and I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Chris Thompson to Mr. William Ross, dated 16 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the factors underlying delays in issuing child benefit payment books.

A combination of factors gave rise to problems in the Child Benefit Office that caused delays in payment books being issued. There was disruption when the Office had to relocate to new premises at Windsor House in November 1997. Added to this were problems with the introduction of two new computer systems, one of which required a key additional feature which was not initially available. There were also technical problems which caused difficulties for staff accessing the computer system; response times were slower and in many instances live claims were rejected. Furthermore, staff took action in April 1998 in protest against threats by terrorist organisations which also had a serious impact on the provision of services.

A recovery plan has been in operation which included the deployment of extra staff from elsewhere in the Agency. Extensive overtime is also being worked in order to clear the backlog which has been significantly reduced over the last six weeks. It is anticipated that normal service, including the telephone service, should resume in early August.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

TREASURY

Correspondence

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the volume of correspondence sent to, and received from, hon. Members by *(a)* the Inland Revenue and *(b)* Her Majesty's Customs and Excise between (i) January to March 1996 and (b) January to March 1998. [47871]

Dawn Primarolo: The Board of Inland Revenue and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise receive a large volume of correspondence from hon. Members at local office level, regional and collection level, and at their respective Head Offices.

The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Government Debt

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list in cash terms total Government debt in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98. [51474]

Mr. Darling: Cash figures for net public sector debt in 1996–97 were published in Table B7 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report. Estimates of net public sector debt as a proportion of GDP in 1997–98 were published in Table 4.5 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report. The estimate of GDP in 1997–98 was published in Table 4.1.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate total Government debt in cash terms for *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02. [51473]

Mr. Darling: Table 4.5 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report showed forecasts of net public sector debt as a proportion of GDP. Forecasts of GDP were published in Table 4.1.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Rent Tribunals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to broaden the range of people eligible to sit on rent tribunals. [50106]

Mr. Raynsford: We want to see tribunals drawn from a broader constituency and representing a balance of expert and lay membership. Though these are expert tribunals and necessarily include qualified lawyers and valuers, we have been concerned about the lack of lay members. My Department has started advertising to recruit more lay members and to widen the catchment from which they are drawn.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49815]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 12 July 1998]:* On *(a)*, I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*. On *(b)*, as part of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's target of twenty five per cent. of dealings with Government being undertaken electronically by 2002, the Department is taking major steps to modernise and bring in electronic services. Among other things, this will provide more opportunity for the Department to correspond electronically with members of the public.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50679]

Angela Eagle: In respect of the volume of correspondence and targets set by this Department for dealing with such correspondence, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service today, *Official Report*, colum *363*. Few staff are solely employed by my Department to handle correspondence; for most staff this is part of their normal duties.

Environmental Impact Assessment Directive

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library copies of correspondence his Departmen: has received in the last six months from the European Commission concerning the implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive as it affects the offshore oil and gas industry. [50634]

Mr. Raynsford: Correspondence between the European Commission and the Member States (including the UK) concerning the implementation of EC Directives is regarded by all parties as confidential.

Housing (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Wandsworth Borough Council on the number of council properties that have been empty for periods longer than three months. [50704]

Mr. Raynsford: I have had no such discussions. However officials of the Government Office for London regularly discuss with Borough officials, as part of the annual Housing Investment Programme determination, many aspects of the Borough's housing strategy and of its performance as a housing authority. Empty council properties are one aspect of that discussion. The Government regularly mention the number of empty houses in each local authority area, and encourage all local authorities to implement strategies to minimise the number of empty houses in their area.

Cycling

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funds have been provided by his Department for the Sustrans UK project; and if he will make a statement. [50726]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department welcomes the contribution the National Cycle Network can make to encouraging people to cycle. In addition to the £43.5m Sustrans received from the Millennium Commission the Department has undertaken to fund the crossings on the trunk road network where this is appropriate.

The Highways Agency is committed to spending around £7.8m on cycle schemes across England's trunk road network. A rolling programme of around 60 crossings are being targeted for completion by the year 2000. In most cases the Highways Agency is working in partnership with local authorities, cycling groups and Sustrans to identify the right schemes.

Air Carrier Liability

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the representations received by his Department on the Air Carrier Liability Order 1998 indicating those in favour and those against the terms of the Order. [50821]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Representations have been received from the following organisations, companies or individuals:

Association of Asia Pacific Airways
Association of British Travel Agents
Barlow Lyde & Gilbert
Beaumont and Son
Board of Airlines Represented in the United Kingdom
British Airways
British Air Transport Association
Harold Caplan Esq.
Dibb Lupton Alsop
International Air Transport Association
Peter Martin Esq.
Lady O'Cathain.

Some of the representations were seeking clarification; others, particularly from the airline industry, were against the terms of the Order.

Dog Fouling

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will discuss with HM Treasury methods by which local authorities could keep the proceeds of fines relating to dog fouling. [50826]

Angela Eagle: Section 4(2) of the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 currently requires local authorities to surrender the proceeds of fines relating to dog fouling to the Secretary of State. The Government will consider whether this should be changed when the next legislation opportunity presents itself.

Packaging Waste Regulations

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many companies registered under the terms of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations by 1977 *(a)* 1 August 1997 and *(b)* 1 April 1998; what income was received by the Government agency in respect of companies registering in each period; and how many prosecutions there were in each period of non-registering companies. [50753]

Angela Eagle: The first deadline for registration with the Environment Agency (the "Agency") as required by the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 was 31 August 1997 and the second 1 April 1998.

By 1 August 1997 records indicate a total of 581 businesses registered with the Agency and subsequently a total of 3,613 businesses registered for the period 31 August 1997 to 1 April 1998. Fees recovered on 1 August 1997 were £720 and subsequently increased to £1,650,600.

By 1 April 1998 records indicate a total of 2,323 businesses were registered with the Agency for the registration period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999 and subsequently a total of 3,376 businesses were registered by the end of June 1998. Fees recovered on 1 August 1998 were £1,497,250 and subsequently £1,482,750.

No prosecutions for non compliance have yet taken place.

Eurostar

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *317*, if he will estimate when Peterborough will be served by direct Eurostar services. [51148]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 367–84, London and Continental Railways, which are responsible for the operation of the Eurostar service, have decided to award a management contract for the service to a consortium comprising British Airways, National Express and the national railways of France and Belgium. This consortium has been asked to review urgently the feasibility of regional Eurostar services, and to report to the Government before the end of the year. We cannot prejudge the outcome of that report.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department's negotiations for the construction of the CTRL will be concluded before LCR's review of the feasibility of regional Eurostar services is completed. [51170]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Negotiations for the construction of the CTRL and the review of the feasibility of regional Eurostar services are being taken forward in parallel. Negotiations for the construction of the CTRL are being progressed with a view to allowing construction to start later this year. The consortium selected to operate Eurostar have been asked to review urgently the feasibility of regional services and report by the end of this year.

National Air Traffic Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many companies have expressed an interest in taking a stake in the National Air Traffic Services. [51182]

Ms Glenda Jackson: One organisation has so far expressed an interest.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the names of *(a)* consultants and *(b)* legal advisers currently employed or to be employed by (i) his Department, (ii) the Civil Aviation Authority and (iii) National Air Traffic Services to provide advice on the public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services. [51181]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department is in the early stages of appointing consultants and legal advisers to provide advice on the public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services. Neither the Civil Aviation Authority nor the National Air Traffic Services currently employ consultants or legal advisers for this purpose, but are considering their need for such services.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many additional staff have been or are planned to be employed by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* NATS and *(c)* the CAA to deal with the proposed public-private partnership for the National Air Traffic Services. [51215]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions intends to staff the work relating to the proposed public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services from existing resources. Neither NATS nor the CAA employ or plan to employ additional staff for this work.

Airports (South-east England)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what work *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Civil Aviation Authority are carrying out to assess the possibility of (i) RAF Northolt and (ii) Redhill Aerodrome being used as feeder or reliever airports for Heathrow and Gatwick Airports. [51175]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Neither my Department nor the Civil Aviation Authority are carrying out work to assess the possibility of RAF Northolt or Redhill Aerodrome being used as feeder or reliever airports for Heathrow or Gatwick.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the working groups established by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Civil Aviation Authority to discuss airport capacity in the South East of England. [51190]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No working groups have been established for this purpose by either my Department or the Civil Aviation Authority in the last few years.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of when Stansted Airport will become slot constrained. [51167]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Stansted Airport Ltd. notified the Department on 7 July that in its opinion conditions are such that Stansted Airport should be fully coordinated for slot allocation purposes under Article 3 of EC Regulation 95/93 with effect from Summer 1999. The Government will consider if the airport should be so designated following consultation with airlines and other relevant organisations on a capacity analysis in accordance with the Regulation.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what work BAA plc has carried out recently at his Department's request on a scheme for a close parallel runway at Gatwick. [51377]

Ms Glenda Jackson: BAA plc is not currently undertaking any work at the request of my Department in relation to the possibility of developing a close parallel runway at Gatwick Airport. The work which the previous Administration asked BAA to undertake into this concept following publication of the report on Runway Capacity in the South East (RUCATSE) is not yet complete. We have asked BAA to put the work on hold so that we can consider how to take this issue forward in the light of the Integrated Transport White Paper.

Transatlantic Air Service

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the transatlantic routes that are currently served only by British Airways or American Airlines services. [51198]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The UK/US routes that are served only by British Airways are:

London—Baltimore
London—Charlotte
London—Phoenix
London—Pittsburgh
London—San Diego
London—Seattle
London—Tampa.

The UK/US routes that are currently served only by American Airlines are:

London—Raleigh Durham
Manchester—Chicago
Glasgow—Chicago.

In addition to those routes London—Dallas is served by both British Airways and American Airlines, but no other airline.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of driver and vehicle records have been found to be accurate in each of the last five years. [51200]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information is not available in the form requested. However, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has since 1994/95 been set targets for the accuracy with which it captures the data provided by its customers.

The table shows the targets and the results:

Percentage of output without error

Vehicle registration documents	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
New vehicle				
Target	98	98	98	98
Actual	98.3	98.4	98.5	98
Changes				
Target	93	93	96	97
Actual	92.3	94.3	96.4	97
Drivers licences				
Target	95	96	97	98
Actual	95.4	96.6	97	98

These percentages apply to the 13 million registration documents and 7 million driving licenses issued annually.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* driver licence and *(b)* vehicle registration applications were received by the DVLA for each of the last five years. [51199]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The volumes of driver licences and vehicle registration applications received by the DVLA for each of the last five years are:

million

Year	*Driver licences*	*Vehicle registrations*
1993–94	6.4	13.4
1994–95	6.3	13.7
1995–96	6.4	14.3
1996–97	6.7	14.7
1997–98	6.8	15.6

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the computer system used by the DVLA was last upgraded; and what proposals he has for future developments to it. [51172]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The DVLA drivers computer system has recently been upgraded to permit the issue of photocard licences. The vehicle system is currently being upgraded and this will be completed by the end of the year. A number of other amendments and improvements

are in hand including ensuring that all systems are year 2000 compliant and are responsive to customer requirements.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for the most recent five years for which records are available *(a)* the number of heavy goods vehicles tested and *(b)* the number of HGV test failures due to exhaust emissions. [51126]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The figures requested are as follows:

Year	*Number tested*	*Number failed*
1993–94	448,446	10,763
1994–95	447,660	7,163
1995–96	447,836	9,852
1996–97	452,916	11,776
1997–98	453,568	9,525

Tenders (Environmental Criteria)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what specific environmental and energy-saving criteria are included in standard *(a)* tender documents and *(b)* tender evaluation procedures in respect of Government contracts for (i) new building, (ii) renovation works and (iii) heating and lighting. [51025]

Angela Eagle: Government departments are individually responsible for determining their accommodation requirements including the specification of environmental and energy saving criteria in their tender documents. Advice on these matters is available to Government departments from the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) and other sources such as the best practice guides produced by the Building Research Energy Conservation Support Unit (BRECSU) and the Energy Technology Support Unit (ETSU).

DETR has produced a Green Guide for Buyers which provides general advice on conserving resources and reducing waste and pollution. It is available on DETR's web site for greening government.

Elderly Tenants (Pets)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to housing authorities and housing associations supporting prospective elderly tenants who already have and wish to retain a pet. [50937]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* It is for local authorities and Registered Social Landlords to decide which of their dwellings are and are not appropriate for pets, taking into account the needs of all their tenants and residents.

Leaseholders

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* percentage and *(b)* number of long leaseholders have taken advantage of the provisions contained in the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993 to enfranchise. [50942]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Research carried out for the Department by Sheffield Hallam University, and to be published shortly, has found that 19 per cent. (49) of leaseholders who contacted LEASE for advice on enfranchisement under the provisions contained in the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993 successfully enfranchised under these provisions. The Department has no information on the numbers of leaseholders who have successfully enfranchised without contacting LEASE.

We are concerned that the existing rules for collective enfranchisement for flats are unduly complex and that it can be difficult for leaseholders to enfranchise. We intend to address this problem in our forthcoming consultation paper on leasehold reform.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many leaseholders living in blocks of flats of 50 units or more have successfully enfranchised their leases under the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993. [50948]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Research carried out for the Department by Sheffield Hallam University, and to be published shortly, found no leaseholders living in blocks of flats of 50 or more units who had enfranchised their leases.

Coastal Pollution

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has for long-term monitoring of the effects of sludge dumping in Liverpool Bay; and what will be the role of water companies in such monitoring. [51383]

Angela Eagle: The arrangements for monitoring maritime sewage-sludge dumping sites around the United Kingdom, including Liverpool Bay, are described in "Towards 2000: Marine Monitoring in the 1990s", the fifth report of the UK Marine Pollution Monitoring Group, published this year by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science.

OSPAR Convention

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to inform interested parties of the Government's policy at the forthcoming ministerial meeting of the OSPAR convention in Portugal; and if he will place in the Library the United Kingdom's submissions to the negotiating committee for the conference. [51410]

Mr. Meacher: On 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *325–26*, I answered a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) setting out our objectives at the forthcoming ministerial meeting of the OSPAR Commission. I and my officials are meeting various interested non-governmental organisations. I am placing in the Library copies of the paper which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has submitted to the OSPAR Commission and of

the papers submitted by the United Kingdom to the meeting of the Commission at official level and to the last three meetings of the official Heads of Delegation.

Housing Corporation Grants

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of Housing Corporation grant has been allocated to rural areas; and how many new homes have been started or completed as a result in each of the last five years. [51487]

Mr. Raynsford: The table sets out details of the proportion of Housing Corporation grant and the number of approvals allocated to rural areas in the last five years. The information is based upon schemes within settlements of up to 3,000 population.

Housing Corporation grant and approvals in rural areas

	Percentage of HC grant	*Approvals*
1993–94	4.6	2,200
1994–95	5.6	2,399
1995–96	5.2	1,363
1996–97	5.8	2,157
1997–98	5.1	1,034

Source:
The Housing Corporation

Housing

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of affordable housing need in *(a)* rural areas and *(b)* villages of less than 1,000 population. [51488]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department recently commissioned a study on the nature of demand for housing in rural areas, including affordable housing. The research looked at five different types of rural areas in England with populations ranging from 7,500 to 15,000 people, where most of the main settlements were of less than 1,000 population. A report on this project will be published by the contractors, DTZ Pieda, soon.

All local authorities are encouraged to carry out assessments of housing need to inform housing strategies and development plans. Local assessments provide the justification for local authorities to specify a proportion of affordable housing to be provided on suitable sites identified in the development plan, and to negotiate the inclusion of an element of affordable housing in private developments.

Boundary Review (London)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the boundary review in London will be conducted on the basis of universal three member wards in order to facilitate elections by thirds. [51470]

Mr. Raynsford: Our consultation paper "Modernising Local Government: local democracy and community leadership" set out options for more frequent local elections, and considered the possible implications for warding arrangements. We are considering the responses to that consultation, and will put forward firm proposals in a local government White Paper this Summer.

Transport Expenditure

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his expenditure plans for transport programmes, pursuant to the publication of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. [51805]

Mr. Prescott: I am today announcing, in conjunction with the publication of our Integrated Transport White Paper, plans to revitalise local and public transport. An extra £1.8bn of funds will be made available for local transport, bus services, road maintenance and railways.

The table shows my Department's current plans to use the resources available for transport programmes.

These plans will secure greatly increased investment in transport infrastructure, through both increases in public spending in areas identified as priorities in our Integrated Transport White Paper and through partnership with the private sector. It will allow local authorities to spend almost twice as much on their transport programmes in 2001–02 as they do now.

Extra public spending on rail services will bring in substantial amounts of private investment, and by removing bottlenecks in the network, real improvements for passengers and freight in support of our objective of reducing car use.

The plans involve:

£700m more for local authorities to establish 150 new Local Transport Plans and to restore cuts in maintenance of their principal roads;

£300m more for local bus services. Buses have a major contribution to make to developing more sustainable transport policies. The Government have already allocated this year an extra £50m for rural transport.

more than £300m additional resources for the rail industry (including support for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link) on top of the annual subsidy of over £1bn to rail operators for existing franchise contracts. These new resources will allow for extra freight grants, and extra funds to be made available from two new sources—the Infrastructure Investment Fund and the Rail Passenger Partnership Scheme;

over £400m extra spending on the trunk road and motorway network with priority given to maintenance of the existing trunk road network and to making better use of it;

resources for the new Mayor to pursue an integrated transport strategy for London as soon as the Greater London Authority is set up and to allow the acceleration of various initiatives in the Capital.

These plans reflect the reduced demands on public support for the London Underground from 2000–01 as a result of the new public private partnership arrangements. These were announced on 20 March, along with £365m additional resources for this year and next. The plans will allow £7bn of investment to take place in the Underground over the next 15 years. The expenditure plans also take account of the reduced subsidy required for train operating companies which are contractually committed to maintaining service levels and improving performance whilst receiving less subsidy. All these savings taken together, amount to £1.9 billion over three years.

More details of how extra spending on the trunk and motorway network will be targeted will be given when the roads review is published.

£ million

	1998–99 Budget	1999–2000 Plans	2000–01 Plans	2001–02 Plans
Programme area within Departmental Expenditure Limit:				
Motorways and trunk roads	1,350	1,407	1,536	1,580
Local transport	523	598	695	987
Support for local buses[1]	262	313	355	425
Railways (Domestic and International)	1,758	1,569	1,490	1,630
Transport programmes in London[2]	599	436	128	157
Other transport	186	227	266	261

[1] Bus fuel duty rebate, rural bus grants and concessionary bus fares for the elderly

[2] Includes London Transport (and Croydon Tramlink) and other transport programmes currently administered by the Government Office for London. Excludes spending in London on trunk roads and motorways by the Highways Agency and support for transport capital expenditure by the Boroughs from the local transport settlement. Includes no provision for London Underground from 2000–01, from when a PPP is planned to be in place

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of CO_2 emission levels from the nuclear industry in the United Kingdom, with particular reference to emissions during *(a)* construction, *(b)* generation and *(c)* decommissioning and disposal; and if he will make a statement. [50833]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

No separate figures in the form requested are available. It is estimated that nuclear electricity generation leads to emissions of about 4 grams of carbon dioxide per kilowatt hour of electricity delivered to the final user. Of these 4 grams, 3.2 grams are emitted in the process of uranium extraction and the remainder during fuel processing.

Carbon dioxide emissions from nuclear generation are less than 1 per cent. of equivalent figures for any of the major fossil-fuelled electricity generation technologies.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applicants were unable to pay for legal representation to assist them in the preparation of their cases during the last 12 months. [50105]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that it is not possible to determine how many asylum applicants were unable to pay for advice or legal representation. The available information is that the Immigration Advisory Service and The Refugee Legal Centre—Home Office funded bodies—provided free advice to 10,578 refused asylum applicants at the appeal stage over the last financial year (4,455 and 6,123 respectively). In addition to this, the Refugee Legal Centre gave advice in 3,152 asylum applications. These figures do not include those advised by charitable organisations or others working without reimbursement who are unconnected with the Home Office.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current average waiting time for decisions on applications for asylum in the United Kingdom; and what steps he is taking to reduce waiting times. [50824]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Applications lodged before the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 are currently estimated to be taking on average 58 months to reach an initial decision, while those lodged after the Act are taking an average of 14 months. Both of these figures reflect the proportion of inherited old cases within the system, but figures for 1997 show that 38 per cent. of initial decisions on asylum applications were taken within six months, as against 10 per cent. in 1992.

We have been conducting a wide-ranging review of asylum and immigration policy. We hope soon to be able to make a full statement about our future strategy, including proposals to improve the handling of asylum applications. Quite separately, plans are now well advanced for the introduction of more efficient working practices and for the computerisation of casework in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. A trial of the new working practices is to start on 17 August.

World Cup (Policing Costs)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to the United Kingdom Government of the co-operation by UK police forces with French police over policing of World Cup matches involving teams from Scotland and England. [50708]

Mr. Michael: In the case of officers from England and Wales, the cost of travel, overseas allowances and overtime will be met by the Football Association. The salary costs will be met by the officers' respective forces. The Football Association contributed to the costs of police equipment. The salary and associated costs and the cost of travel for officers from Scottish police forces will be met by their respective forces. Equipment costs were met by respective police forces from existing stock. Accommodation costs in France for both sets of officers were met by the French authorities.

The Government will contribute to the costs associated with the 24-hour manning of the National Criminal Intelligence Service Football Unit during the Finals, and will meet some of the costs associated with the provision of additional football intelligence officers who were in France for some England matches. Detailed information about actual costs incurred is operationally sensitive.

Pornography

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce further regulations to control the display of pornographic magazine covers and video cases in shops accessible to children. [50754]

Mr. Michael: Current legislation governing the display of pornographic magazines includes the Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981, which makes it an offence to display any indecent matter which is exposed to view in a public place or where it can be seen from a public place. It is

the responsibility of the police to decide whether there are sufficient grounds to launch a criminal investigation, and that of the Crown Prosecution Service to decide whether to prosecute those alleged to be responsible for the publication.

Most newsagents also abide by a voluntary code of practice, refusing to sell "adult" magazines to persons under the age of 18 and placing pornographic magazines on the top shelf and out of reach of children.

With respect to videos, before the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) gives full certification to a video work, the sleeve must be seen and approved by the Video Packaging Review Committee. This Committee is chaired by a representative of the BBFC and comprises members of the British Video Association and the Video Standards Council. The sleeves seen by the Committee account for over 90 per cent. of all video works on the market.

While the issue of indecent displays is kept under constant review, there are currently no plans to introduce further regulations in this area.

Animal Experiments

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for reducing the backlog of applications for licences, and amendments to licences, under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [50866]

Mr. George Howarth: We are continuing to explore and, as far as possible, exploit all possible options for managing and reducing the backlog in our London office. This backlog arose primarily due to the loss of experienced staff (for unavoidable reasons) and has built up due to difficulties in attracting and retaining staff for this type of work.

We are in the process of recruiting staff, through open competition, and we are arranging a selection Board for promoting existing Home Office staff to fill two posts currently held by casual staff. These two recruitment exercises should provide the best choice of candidates and a more permanent solution than employing casual staff for short periods.

In the meantime, we have recently recruited another member of casual staff and now have a full complement of staff in our London office. To reduce the backlog, staff are continuing to work overtime and have been joined in London, on occasions, by colleagues from our regional offices.

A minor technical problem has recently been overcome to allow London cases to be transferred to other regional offices to process.

We are also looking to see whether there are elements of work currently carried out by the licensing team which they might stop doing whilst the backlog is cleared—one possibility is to no longer advise project licence holders that their licence will shortly expire. Licensees would, as a consequence, need to remain alert to the date on which their authorities expire and the need to apply for any replacement licence well before that date.

In the longer term, we are exploring how modern IT systems can improve the licensing operation and whether the personal licence system can be streamlined.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications, under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, for licences, and amendments to licences, were awaiting decision on *(a)* 1 July 1998, *(b)* 1 January 1998 and *(c)* 1 July 1997. [50867]

Mr. George Howarth: This information can be provided only at disproportionate cost, and the process would significantly worsen the backlog problem about which my hon. Friend is rightly concerned.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many duplicated experiments were carried out in 1997 under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [51122]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 19 January 1998 *Official Report*, column *387*.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to announce a ban on the use of animals for cosmetic ingredient testing; and what is the time scale for a ban becoming operative. [51121]

Mr. George Howarth: This is an extremely complex issue and we are still exploring the implications of various courses of action.

Under European Directives, including the Cosmetics and Dangerous Substances Directives, ingredients must be tested on animals to show that they are safe in use, manufacture and transport. Industry strongly contends that there is a need for certain types of new ingredients for cosmetic products, particularly UVA filters for such products as sunscreens.

We must ensure that any action we take is sustainable and does not unnecessarily disadvantage United Kingdom research, medicine and industry or compromise public safety.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what factors underlay the reduction in the proportion of non-legislative animal tests carried out for cosmetic purposes between 1995 and 1996. [51120]

Mr. George Howarth: Additional data on cosmetic testing, above that required for the annual statistics report, are collected separately. In 1996, the way in which this additional information was collected was changed. The data needed to identify the factors in which the hon. Member is interested are not available before 1996.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the countries from which dogs were imported into the United Kingdom for experiments in 1996 and 1997, indicating the number from each country; how often his Department's inspectors visited these overseas breeding establishments under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and if the code of practice for breeding establishments is enforced in these non-United Kingdom establishments. [51123]

Mr. George Howarth: In total, 478 dogs in 1996 and 214 dogs in 1997 were acquired from the United States of America. All were purpose-bred and were obtained from breeding establishments which meet their national standards.

Home Office inspectors have not visited these establishments. They have no right to access to establishments in other countries nor can we enforce our codes in non-United Kingdom establishments.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many animals were bred for scientific procedures but killed prior to use in any procedure in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [51124]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 19 January 1998, *Official Report*, columns *388–89*.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in reviewing section 24 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; and what plans he has to amend it following the Government's freedom of information proposals. [51207]

Mr. George Howarth: No decision has yet been taken. We are still awaiting final details on the proposals for freedom of information legislation.

Air Guns

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for a public information campaign on the potential dangers posed by air guns. [51026]

Mr. Michael: Copies of a public information leaflet on air gun safety may be obtained from police firearms licensing departments or from the Home Office. We shall consider, in consultation with the police, shooting organisations and other interested bodies, whether this leaflet needs to be revised. We have no immediate plans for a further publicity campaign on this issue.

Most air gun shooters are responsible and law-abiding citizens, who pursue their hobby safely. Regrettably, a small minority of people misuse air guns. There are already laws to prevent air gun misuse and people breaking those laws can face severe penalties, including life imprisonment for the most serious offences.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the Metropolitan Police has spent on the services of lobbying companies in *(a)* the last and *(b)* the current financial year; and which companies have been engaged. [51466]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner tells me that the Metropolitan Police Service does not engage the services of lobbying companies, and has no plans to do so.

Crime (Care Homes)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons the British Crime Survey excludes from their statistics crimes committed against people living in care homes; and if his Department has any plans to include such crimes in future. [51505]

Mr. Michael: The British Crime Survey (BCS), conducted by the Home Office, is a survey of people living in private households in England and Wales. In its present format and structure, it would be impossible for it also to provide an adequate measure of offences committed against people who live in residential care homes without a major change to its format, structure and scope. A sample of care homes within the size of sample for BCS purposes would be too small to permit reliable analysis. For this reason we have concluded that it would require a specially designed survey. A feasibility study into a possible survey of communal establishments is being undertaken by Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics. As yet, no decision has been taken on the types of communal establishment this would cover, whether victimisation will be covered or the funding arrangements for such a survey.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review, when he proposes to announce the details of the settlement for his Department. [51806]

Mr. Straw: Tomorrow. At 3.30pm I will be publishing a research study entitled "Reducing offending: an assessment of research evidence on ways of dealing with offending behaviour", which will provide the evidential basis for my plans for tackling crime.

WALES

Llanllyfni Bypass

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what account his Department will take of the impact on the health and safety of local residents in determining whether to allow the Llanllyfni bypass to proceed. [50828]

Mr. Hain: The benefits of removing traffic from communities, and the resulting improvement in the safety and environment of local residents, is an integral part of the consideration of any road scheme, including the A487 Llanwnda to south of Llanllyfni improvement, which is currently subject to the Strategic Trunk Roads Review.

Food Sector

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his proposals for the development of the food sector in Wales. [51794]

Mr. Ron Davies: The markets for general agricultural products are competitive, and will become increasingly so. Wales needs premium products, which can command premium prices. We need much greater food processing in Wales, to add value to Wales's primary agricultural products. We need products with a strong brand image, and we must exploit as many niche markets as possible.

I have announced action today to develop industry-led action plans, setting clear priorities for the action that must be taken in the lamb and beef, dairy and organic sectors in the first instance.

As part of this, I am very concerned that work on promoting Welsh food, and work in supporting economic development in the food sector in Wales should go hand in hand. This is critical if there is to be coherent effective support for action by the industry. I have therefore decided to give the WDA a clear responsibility for supporting the development of the food industry in Wales.

The WDA will work in close partnership with the Welsh Office Agriculture Department in facilitating the formulation of the industry-led action plans and it will lead in co-ordinating action in support of those plans. This new responsibility for the WDA will be a key part of the role that the new, all-Wales Agency will plan in promoting development in rural Wales. In giving the WDA this remit, I am endorsing the recommendations that the Welsh Affairs Committee, amongst others, have made to this effect.

In support of this, the Board of Welsh Food Promotions has agreed that work should transfer to the WDA at the start of October this year. WFP staff will be offered employment with the WDA, and the Company will subsequently be wound up. Our aim in this way is to sustain and build on WFP's achievements. I would like to pay particular thanks to Alun Evans, the Chairman of WFP, and his Board, for steering the Company through a difficult period.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when an appointment will be made to the post of Chairman of the new Welsh Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [51795]

Mr. Ron Davies: I am very pleased to announce that Mr. David Rowe-Beddoe has accepted my offer of the post of Chairman of the new Agency following an open competition. This will take effect in the Autumn upon the merger of the WDA and the Development Board for Rural Wales (DBRW) and the Land Authority for Wales (LAW).

Local Authority Audit Arrangements

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will set out the guidelines for determining the audit arrangements for trading subsidiaries of local authorities and the relevant definitions for not-for-profit companies financed in whole or in part by local authorities causing them to be regarded as *(a)* privately influenced and *(b)* public sector influenced. [51312]

Mr. Ron Davies: The basic framework for classifying local authorities' interests in companies is set out in Part V of the Local Government and Housing Act 1985. Section 69 of the Act describes the circumstances which would lead to a company being one which is treated as "influenced" by a local authority.

The Local Authorities (Companies) Order 1995 (SI 1995 No. 849) includes requirements applicable to companies subject to the influence of local authorities within the meaning of the 1989 Act.

In March 1995, the Welsh Office issued an explanatory guide to local authorities' interests in companies. Paragraphs 10 and 11 of this guide provides general advice on private sector influenced companies and public sector influenced companies. The question of which category an influenced company falls into is one for local authorities to decide in conjunction with their auditors and legal advisers.

Not all local authority trading subsidiaries are companies. Where such subsidiaries are not legally separate from the authority, auditors will be the same as that for the authority.

The Audit Commission is responsible for appointing auditors to local authorities in England and Wales. Appointed auditors should ensure that local authorities have complied with the provisions of the 1989 Act. This will include consideration of the classification of companies as well as other appropriate requirements. Auditors may also consider how local authorities have discharged their stewardship responsibilities in relation to transactions undertaken through the medium of a local authority company.

Audits of private sector or public sector influenced companies must be carried out by auditors registered under the Companies Acts, although the authority's auditor may seek assurance as to the adequacy of controls operated by the company to safeguard public funds.

In May 1996, the Audit Commission issued guidance to auditors on the audit approach to local authority companies in the form of Technical Release 11/96.

Copies of the Welsh Office guide to local authorities' interests in companies and of Technical Release 11/96 has been placed in the Library of the House.

SCOTLAND

Further Education Leavers

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of 18 year olds leaving further education entered *(a)* full-time or part-time education, *(b)* job-related training, *(c)* employment without a training element and *(d)* unemployment in Scotland in each year since 1988. [48492]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 8 July 1998]:* The information requested is not collected centrally.

Young People (Reoffending)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what statistics his Department collates on the re-offending rates of young people who have been referred to children's panels following the reporting of an offence; and if he will make a statement. [50601]

Mr. Galbraith: Responsibility for collection and publication of data on the Children's hearings system lies with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration.

The only relevant information collected relates to children referred to Reporters on offence grounds on more than one occasion, and this is not collated routinely. I have asked the Principal Reporter to write to the right hon. Gentleman with more details of this information.

Community Organisations

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will set up a study to examine practice in the management of community organisations funded by Urban Aid, EU or other regeneration funds, and produce guidelines to ensure good management of such organisations in future. [50548]

Mr. Macdonald: The allocation of moneys from the Urban Programme, EU and other regeneration funds is governed by clear conditions. The responsibility for supervising and monitoring the performance and activities of individual community organisations in accordance with these conditions rests with central departments, local authorities or other agents of government, depending on the source of the funding. However the Government take seriously any reports of poor practice in the management of community organisations which have access to public funds, and seek to ensure that the appropriate examination and monitoring procedures are adhered to.

Nursery Education

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list for each local education authority area the provision of nursery places to be provided by non-statutory bodies and private providers in the academic year 1998–99; [50426]

(2) if he will estimate the number of children currently attending nurseries provided by private providers who will not be able to continue to do so in the academic year 1998–99 because the facilities have been withdrawn by the local education authority. [50427]

Mr. Wilson: The number and distribution of grant funded pre-school education places which local authorities will commission in school year 1998–99 from partner centres will not be known accurately until the autumn. Estimates have however been received from each authority and the information is set out in the table.

It is likely there will be some parents of pre-school year children in the school year 1998–99 who, because their local authority has decided not to commission places from their preferred registered provider, will have to decide whether to move their child to another centre which *is* grant-eligible or to pay for a place at their preferred provider themselves. A reliable estimate of the number of parents so affected would however require data which are not collected centrally.

Estimated number of pre-school education places to be commissioned by local authorities from registered partner providers in the voluntary and private sectors

Local authority	*Number of places*
Aberdeen City	600
Aberdeenshire	100
Angus	30
Argyll and Bute	469
Clackmannanshire	43
Dumfries and Galloway	100
Dundee City	0
East Ayrshire	0
East Dunbartonshire	300
East Lothian	120
East Renfrewshire	170
City of Edinburgh	680
Falkirk	0
Fife	120
City of Glasgow	150
Highland	417
Inverclyde	170
Midlothian	0
Moray	120
North Ayrshire	600
North Lanarkshire	524
Orkney Islands	6
Perth and Kinross	190
Renfrewshire	200
Scottish Borders	100
Shetland Islands	73
South Ayrshire	20
South Lanarkshire	630
Stirling	30
West Dunbartonshire	0
West Lothian	15
Western Isles	233
Scotland	6,210

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the criteria to be used to review the way that local education authorities have exercised their discretion in entering into local partnerships with private sector organisations to provide nursery places for the academic year 1998–99. [50425]

Mr. Wilson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to him on 21 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *585*.

Intestacy

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what sums passed to the Crown as ultimus haeres from Scottish estates where the deceased failed to leave an effective will in the last year for which figures are available. [51440]

Mr. McLeish: The total sum passed to the Crown Office in Scotland as Ultimus Haeres for the year 1 January 1997 to 31 December 1997 was £1,708,773.03.

The part of the sum attributable to Scottish estates where the deceased failed to leave a Will cannot be identified separately from sums passing to the Crown from dissolved companies without disproportionate cost to the Department.

PRIME MINISTER

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Prime Minister what is his office's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48672]

The Prime Minister: It is not possible for me to deal personally with all of the letters I receive and I must therefore refer most of them to the Department with responsibility for the policy or the matter in question. We ask Departments to respond within their targets for dealing with correspondence.

One of the six service standards for central government requires Departments to set a target for responding to letters from members of the public and to publish information on their performance. A report on the performance of the main Departments against the six standards is being prepared and will be made available to the House shortly.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Prime Minister what is the e-mail address of his Office's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49822]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Downing Street receives approximately 7,000 items of correspondence a week from the general public—approximately three times as much as received prior to the General Election. The majority receive a response from my office or the relevant Government Department. There are no plans at present to introduce a dedicated e-mail address for the 10 Downing Street Correspondence Unit. However, the Government are currently considering policy on providing Ministers with e-mail addresses. Number 10's allocation of an e-mail address will be in line with this policy once it has been finalised.

The 10 Downing Street website (*www.number-10.gov.uk*) also provides five discussion fora where the public can post their views on matters of Government policy.

No. 10 Policy Unit

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if a telephone log is kept showing the incoming and outgoing calls to and from the No. 10 Policy Unit. [49963]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 10 July 1998]:* The facilities under the previous Government continue to operate whereby an automatic record is kept of the telephone numbers called from the No. 10 switchboard.

BBC Vice-chairman

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what names have been provided to him or his office following the advertisement for candidates who wish to be considered for appointment as vice-chairman of the BBC. [50535]

The Prime Minister: These appointments are made by the Prime Minister with the approval of Her Majesty the Queen and they will be announced, in the normal way, when the full appointment process is completed.

The Observer

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) on 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 1065, what factors led him to his conclusion that *The Observer* claimed to have a tape recording of a conversation with a member of his staff in relation to payments for contacts; and when he reached that conclusion. [50533]

The Prime Minister: In an interview broadcast on BBC Radio Five Live on 6 July 1998, Mr. Gregory Pallast, a journalist from *The Observer*, was asked in relation to an alleged conversation with a member of my staff "Do you have that on tape?". Mr. Pallast replied "I have that for certain".

In a discussion broadcast that evening on the BBC television programme "Newsnight" Mr. Pallast was again repeatedly asked whether he could produce a tape. He did not take the opportunity to deny that one existed.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will establish an independent review of the legal processes relating to Lockerbie. [49275]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 July 1998]:* No. Since taking office, my noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate, in his independent role as prosecutor, has fully reviewed the evidence relating to the Lockerbie case. He concluded that, on the evidence available, it would be right to pursue the petition warrants against the two Libyan accused.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the most recent requests for investigations which the Government have made to the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the date each request was communicated to the Committee. [51224]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The Committee on Standards in Public Life does not have powers of investigation, but undertakes more general inquiries about standards of conduct in public life. On 12 November 1997, I wrote to Lord Neill, Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, inviting the Committee to look at the funding of political parties, and extending their terms of reference to enable them to undertake this study. The Committee's inquiry is due to be completed in September 1998. The Government have made no subsequent requests to the Committee.

Overseas Visits

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 23 February 1998, *Official Report*, column 2, when he expects to write to the right hon. Member for Wokingham indicating the cost of his trip to Japan. [51421]

The Prime Minister: Shortly.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Library

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans the British Library has for the charging of readers fees for *(a)* commercial and *(b)* non-commercial users. [50743]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The British Library has no immediate plans to introduce charges for access to the reading rooms but is currently consulting its users on a broad range of issues, including introduction of charges. Any proposal by the Board to introduce charges would require my approval and would be considered in the light of all relevant factors, including the views of readers.

Tourism

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what initiatives his Department has taken in respect of developing sustainable tourism within the United Kingdom. [51031]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* My Department has recently undertaken a nationwide consultation exercise on sustainable tourism and the responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. They will feed into the development of the new strategy for tourism which my Department will launch later this year and will help update the UK Sustainable Development Strategy which will be published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, also later this year.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Exports

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress he can report in lifting the ban on beef exports from the UK. [49420]

Dr. John Cunningham: A Commission proposal to enable beef to be exported from the UK under the Date Based Export Scheme (DBES) is currently under consideration by the Standing Veterinary Committee. The UK is making every effort to secure an early agreement on the best possible terms.

Technetium-99

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that monitoring takes place of concentrations of Technetium-99 in seaweed and crustaceans along the north coast of Wales. [50635]

Mr. Rooker: The Department continues to carry out regular monitoring and assessment of concentrations of technetium-99 in aquatic materials from the north coast of Wales.

The results are published annually in the Department's report "Radioactivity in Food and the Environment". The latest report, for 1996, shows that concentrations of technetium-99 in seaweed and crustaceans along the north coast of Wales are of negligible radiological significance. The report for 1997 will be published in the autumn.

Veterinary Medicines Directorate

Mr. Wicks: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Veterinary Medicines Directorate will publish the Annual Report on Surveillance for Veterinary Residues in 1997; and if he will make a statement. [51742]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are committed to giving consumers the maximum possible information on the presence of residues in food, with appropriate advice on the significance of any results. The Annual Report on Surveillance for Veterinary Residues in 1997 is being published by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) today and it paints a very positive picture of the current situation in the UK.

The VMD operates a statutory national sampling and surveillance scheme and a complementary non-statutory programme. In 1997 some 42,000 samples were collected and subjected to around 57,000 analyses in GB. The VMD reports the results of its surveillance quarterly in the Medicines Act Veterinary Information Service (MAVIS) and in much greater detail in this Annual Report. The results continue to show that the presence of residues of veterinary medicines from all sources in food is very low.

The main points to emerge from the Report are:

99.5 per cent. of statutory samples tested in 1997 were free of detectable residues compared to 99.2 per cent. in 1996.

More significantly, the "positive" samples fell from 0.24 per cent. in 1996 to 0.13 per cent. in 1997.

This Report, for the first time, gives details of the follow up investigations which are undertaken on all positive samples. Two successful prosecutions were taken and the report outlines initiatives which are being introduced to improve the chances of successful prosecutions int the future.

The Report, which is available free of charge from the VMD, explains how the VMD obtains samples, how and where they analyse them and what they do with the results. It places the surveillance programmes into the current and future EC context and, to help the lay reader, includes a glossary of technical terms. The results are all placed into a toxicological context which I believe will re-assure consumers that, because of the considerable margins of safety which are applied when maximum residue limits for veterinary medicines are established, the very low levels of residues currently found under the schemes are unlikely to pose a health risk.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Attorney-General how many barristers over six years call were employed as lawyers by the Crown Prosecution Service during each of the years 1993 to 1997. [50096]

The Attorney-General: On 1 April of each year, the Crown Prosecution Service employed the following number of barristers with over six years' call:

	Number
1993	205
1994	284
1995	393
1996	441
1997	513

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Attorney-General what assistance is given to unqualified Crown Prosecution staff to develop their careers, with particular reference to obtaining formal legal qualifications; and if he will make a statement. [50145]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service offers a number of training contracts to law students leading to professional status as barristers and solicitors through its Legal Trainee Recruitment Schemes. Approximately one-third of the available places have been allocated to staff in the CPS enabling them to achieve professional qualifications and appointments as Crown Prosecutors.

There are also a number of other development opportunities available which include:

- A two level Casework Officer Training Scheme designed jointly with the Institute of Legal Executives (ILEX). The first level comprises nine modules covering general legal procedures such as committals, indictments and trial procedure. Level two is a two year course which provides more advanced legal training and can lead to exemption from the ILEX paper on criminal law.
- A range of in-house courses and distance learning packages offered to develop expertise on a number of legal and non-legal subjects. In addition, sponsorship is available for a range of external qualifications including NVQ's and the Institute of Legal Executives.
- The Crown Prosecution Service also takes part in the Prince's Trust Volunteer Programme which aims to help 16 to 25 year olds to develop their personal skills through practical teamwork in the community.
- A training programme is also being prepared for the Designated Caseworkers who will be undertaking the review and presentation of cases in the Reducing Delay pilots at selected CPS branch sites commencing October 1998.

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Attorney-General how many registered pupil masters were employed by the Crown Prosecution Service; and how many pupils were trained by those pupil masters in each year since 1993. [50097]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service does not keep historic records of the number of registered pupil masters. However, on 1 July 1998, it employed 98 pupil masters who are registered with the Bar Council.

Similarly, the Crown Prosecution Service does not hold records to show the number of pupils trained by its employed pupil masters. However, the number of pupils employed by the Crown Prosecution Service in each year since 1993 is:

Year	*Number*
1993	23
1994	11
1995	4
1996	1
1997	3
1998	0

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *557–58*, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in the current session would affect women; what consultation she had with women's organisations; and if she will make a statement. [49090]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development has not been responsible for any legislation passed in the current session. The Department assesses all its policies and programmes for gender impact, in line with the guidance on policy appraisal for equal treatment that has been available since 1992.

Our White Paper, published in November 1997, reaffirmed our commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005; one of the key international development targets to which we subscribe.

We also played a key part in formulating the revised guidelines on gender, issued by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in April 1998.

Fair Trading

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her decision to write to the chairmen of the top 500 companies urging them to use Cafédirect in their vending machines. [50553]

Clare Short: Trade is crucial to poverty elimination as it brings the resources that can help generate growth. But we need to ensure that the benefits of trade reach the least developed countries and the poorest people and lead to sustainable economic and social development. Fair and ethical trade have a key role to play in this, both by establishing codes of practice and improving the conditions of workers, and by dealing with smaller producers on the edge of the economy. Many British companies are working for fair and ethical trade in their own business practices and are discussing these issues with my Department.

My letters to the chairmen of the FT500 companies was a request to ask them to consider using fairly traded coffee in their vending machines.

Sex Tourism

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with other countries to offer help and advice in combating sexual tourism in their countries. [50706]

Clare Short: Sex tourism is just one element of sexual exploitation. Social and economic conditions create an environment where poor or vulnerable people in particular are subject to sexual abuse and exploitation, and combating sex tourism is therefore part of the Department for International Development's (DFID) goal of eliminating poverty in poorer countries.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is of particular concern to DFID. DFID funds non-government organisation projects in a number of countries, many of them in Asia, to address sexual exploitation of children.

DFID is involved in the preparations for the ASEM Child Welfare Experts Meeting, which takes place later this year, gathering representatives from ASEM member countries in London, to share experience in tackling sexual exploitation of children.

DFID is supporting the International Labour Organisations International Programme for Elimination of Child Labour in carrying out research on trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The Global March against child labour brought the realities of child labour, including sexual exploitation of children, to many people and governments around the

world. Following the March, at the International Labour Conference, DFID took an active role in agreeing a draft international convention to immediately outlaw the worst forms of child labour; labour that maims, corrupts and kills children. Combating sex tourism is part of that.

Asbestos

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's policy towards advising third-world countries of the dangers of importing and using asbestos. [50705]

Clare Short: My Department is committed to working with our partner countries in their efforts to develop and implement national strategies for sustainable development. This includes working to improve standards of environmental regulation and reverse overall trends in environmental degradation, which may include advice on the use and handling of asbestos in specific cases.

The UK has previously assisted the Hirakud Power Station in India to assess health risks associated with the existence of asbestos lagging, and to identify the most appropriate and safe ways of removing and disposing of hazardous materials.

European Council Regulation No. 2455/92 concerning exports and imports of certain dangerous chemicals establishes a system by which third countries, including developing countries, which import chemicals banned or severely restricted in the European Community are notified of the potential dangers and are informed of the safety precautions which have to be taken, and of the use restrictions of the products within the Community.

The Regulation also implements the procedure of Prior Informed Consent set up by the United Nations Environment Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. This means that EC exporters have to comply with the import conditions of countries participating in the procedures. Asbestos is one of the substances covered by the Regulation, which is implemented in the United Kingdom by the Health and Safety Executive.

Coral Reefs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department has given to the International Coral Reef Initiative. [50020]

Clare Short: My Department has a particular interest in reversing the degradation of coral reef and other coastal ecosystems because these often represent an important source of livelihood of poor communities in the heavily populated coastal areas of the developing countries. Those with greatest dependence on these resources are often the poorest members of these communities.

The United Kingdom is a founder member of the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) and participates in meetings of the ICRI Co-ordinating Planning Committee. Following financial and technical support which UK provided for the ICRI South Asia Region Coral Reef Management Workshop in 1995, my Department has recently funded the preparation and publication of a Manual of Coastal Resource Management in South Asia. We are also helping our partners in South Asia to protect their coral reefs by providing funds and expertise to the International Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO for the development of a South Asia region coral reef monitoring network, the first regional component of a planned global network.

In September this year, the performance of ICRI over its first four years will be reviewed at the International Symposium on Tropical Marine Ecosystems Management, to be held in Australia. My Department has agreed to support the costs associated with attendance at this meeting by representatives from our S. Asia partners countries, from the regional ICRI co-ordinating organisation and from the S. Asia coral reef monitoring network.

The ICRI seeks greater understanding of the ecology of coral reefs, mangrove and seagrass systems on tropical coasts, and urges the sustainable use of these systems for the benefit of dependent populations. During the period 1990 to date, my Department has supported 35 projects with a total commitment of almost £10 million in pursuit of these objectives. Our concern in supporting the protection of coral reefs, and other tropical coastal ecosystems, is to help our partners stabilise and regenerate natural resources which are of significant importance to global efforts to eradicate poverty.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Funds

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), of 7 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *202–04*, if he will place in the Library a list of projects supported over the last year for which figures are available for budget lines *(a)* A-3024 and A-3104, *(b)* A-3020 and A-3100, *(c)* A-3029 and A-3109, *(d)* A-3037 and A-3117, *(e)* A-3025 and A3105, *(f)* B3–302, *(g)* A-3021 and A3101, *(h)* B3–301, *(i)* B3–300 and *(j)* A-3022 and A-3103; and who monitors the activities funded in the United Kingdom. [49651]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I have already placed in the Library reports on beneficiaries of grants from Part A of the Community budget in 1997 and 1998 (to 30 May). These cover all the budget lines in this question apart from B3–300 and B3–301 and B3–302, for which a breakdown of projects funded over the last year is not available. All activities funded under these budget lines are monitored in the first instance by the Commission.

Edgar Fernandes

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Government of Turkey concerning the case of Edgar Fernandes; and if he will publish their response. [50673]

Mr. Fatchett: Our Embassy sent a Diplomatic Note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Ankara on 5 June. The Note pressed the authorities for information on the investigation into Mr. Fernandes' death and the progress of the extradition request for the suspect to be returned from Malta to Turkey. the MFA replied with

Diplomatic Notes on 17 and 24 June. They confirmed an investigation was still being conducted and they had not yet received a response from the Maltese authorities. The Turkish authorities informed our Embassy orally on 14 July that a formal extradition request had been handed to the Maltese Embassy in Rome.

Treaty of Canterbury

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have had with (i) the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, (b) Eurotunnel and *(c)* the French Government regarding Clause 33.3 of the Treaty of Canterbury. [51176]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There is no Clause 33.3 of the Treaty of Canterbury. My hon. Friend may be referring to Clause 33.3 of the Channel Fixed Link Concession Agreement.

We are not aware of any discussions in recent years between Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers or officials and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Eurotunnel or the French Government regarding Clause 33.3 of the Concession Agreement, other than in the context of preparing a reply to this question.

Aloïs Brunner

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the Syrian Government on the subject of Aloïs Brunner. [50899]

Mr. Fatchett: We have made no representations to the Syrian government on this matter.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to assist the French Government to extradite Aloïs Brunner for crimes against humanity; and if he will make a statement on the whereabouts of Aloïs Brunner. [50898]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We have no record of any activity by the Government on the subject of Aloïs Brunner, nor evidence of his whereabouts.

Philippines

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for how long those who have applied in the Philippines for settlement in the United Kingdom as the wife of a British citizen have had to wait on average for a decision in the last year. [51230]

Mr. Fatchett: In the last year, the average waiting time in Manila for an interview for a settlement visa has been 8 weeks. In almost all cases, a decision on the application is taken immediately following the interview and the applicant informed at the same time.

Indian Ocean Territories (Fishing)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has for the protection of coral reefs around fishing grounds in the British Indian Ocean Territories. [49590]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Administering the British Indian Ocean Territory's (BIOT) 200 mile Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone is the responsibility of the BIOT Government. It is alert to the need to provide protection for the coral reef fishery. May I refer my hon. Friend to the oral statement made to the House by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development on 1 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns 324–30.

Mexico

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the timetable for discussions on free trade between Mexico and the EU. [51305]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We strongly support the strengthening of EU/Mexico relations, including the liberalisation of trade in goods and services. As EU Presidency, we secured EU agreement to Negotiating Directives which clear the path for formal negotiations with Mexico. The UK will be looking for a package that is fully compatible with WTO rules and offers the EU similar access to the Mexican market as that already given to Mexico's NAFTA partners, the US and Canada. We expect negotiations to begin after the Summer break when the Mexicans have had time to consider EU proposals.

Correspondence

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he intends to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Woking regarding Kenny Richey. [51489]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I am sorry that a substantive reply to the hon. Member's letter to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary of 25 June has been delayed. A full reply was sent to him on 17 July.

Europe Houses

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the countries in which Europe Houses operate; what are the criteria for the establishment of a Europe House; and what discussions are taking place on the establishment of a Europe House in the United Kingdom. [46069]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The International Federation of Europe Houses (FIME) is an association of over 100 education and information centres in 24 European countries, including the UK. Questions about the criteria for membership of FIME should be addressed to them.

Multilateral Agreement on Investment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the implications for human rights of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. [50763]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The purpose of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) is to prevent discrimination against investors on the grounds of their nationality. The Government are pressing for clauses in the MAI which will prevent countries attracting specific investments by lowering environment and labour

standards. We do not believe that the MAI will have any adverse effect on human rights, nor will it prevent the Government from pursuing their human rights agenda.

Gibraltar

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent developments there have been in discussions between Gibraltar and Spain regarding the use of Gibraltar airport; and if he will make a statement. [50676]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 15 July 1998:]* We are not aware of any recent discussions between the Government of Gibraltar and the Spanish authorities regarding the use of Gibraltar airport. We believe that development of Gibraltar airport would bring significant economic benefits for Gibraltar and Spain. We would support any proposal on which all parties could agree.

Pakistan and India

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sanctions have been applied by *(a)* the UK, *(b)* the EU and *(c)* the G8 to (i) Pakistan and (ii) India following their detonation of nuclear devices; and if he will make a statement. [50848]

Mr. Fatchett: G8 countries meeting in London on 12 June agreed to work for a postponement in the consideration of loans to India and Pakistan in the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions, except where these loans were to meet basic human needs.

The EU adopted a similar policy on IFI loans on 8 June. The General Affairs Council also asked the Commission to consider, in a forthcoming review, India and Pakistan's eligibility to benefit from the Community's Generalised System of Preferences in the light of their tests. The General Affairs Council stated that the European Union would take all necessary measures should India and Pakistan not take early steps to accede to the relevant international non-proliferation treaties.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary outlined the measures that the UK took in response to the tests in his statement to the House on 1 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–22. Additional safeguards to prevent proliferation activities by India and Pakistan in the UK were announced to the House by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 687–88.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Business Innovation

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade for what reasons the Business Link Innovation Credit Scheme was cancelled; and what initiatives have replaced it. [48339]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 2 July 1998]:* The Innovation Credit scheme was discontinued at the end of March 1998 as part of a series of measures to simplify funding for Business Links, by reducing the number of separate programme budgets. Business Links are sufficiently experienced to decide for themselves at local level whether a voucher-based scheme of this sort is a priority use of funds.

Gender Impact Assessments

Jackie Ballard: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to the answer of 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 557–58, prior to 18 May, what mechanisms were used to determine how legislation passed in the current session would affect women; what consultation she had with women's organisations; and if she will make a statement. [49091]

Mrs. Beckett: Guidance on policy appraisal for equal treatment has been available in this Department since 1992.

Within the Department we are making increasing use of consultation, research projects and disaggregated statistics to identify the impact of policy on women. For example, in developing the proposals on maternity and parental rights in the White Paper, "Fairness at Work", we consulted key stakeholders including representatives of women's interests.

Similarly, the Low Pay Commission's recommendations for the national minimum wage, which the Government have accepted subject to consultation on the practicalities of implementation, were produced following extensive consultation, including with the Equal Opportunities Commission and women's organisations.

Mirror Group Newspapers

Mr. Radice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she will publish her Department's inspectors' inquiry, set up in April 1992, into the circumstances of the flotation of Mirror Group Newspapers plc; and what is the current state of progress with the report. [50836]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The inspectors have not yet reported to me. A decision on publication will be taken when the report has been received and fully considered. It is not our policy to comment on an inspection during its progress.

Libya

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the impact on United Kingdom trade with Libya of sanctions against that country. [49435]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The Department keeps a watching brief on trade between the United Kingdom and Libya. The United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Libya on 15 April 1992. These sanctions relate to a ban on the sale of goods related to the Military and Aviation sectors, a world-wide ban on flights to and from Libya, and restrictions on diplomatic movement. Further sanctions were introduced on 1 December 1993 and relate to oil-related goods and equipment; material for Libyan airfields, making aircraft available to Libya; and extending the earlier provisions related to technical advice and training. The extended measures also introduced a limited assets freeze. The effect of sanctions on United Kingdom trade with Libya has been minimal. Britain's exports to Libya for 1997

were £269 million, which equates to a 2.5 per cent. decrease on the end-of-year figure for 1993, the year sanctions were introduced. Imports from Libya for 1997 were £231.4 million compared with £156.6 million in 1993.

Electrical Goods

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she is taking to monitor the electrical goods market to ensure that price fixing is not occurring. [51218]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Under UK competition legislation the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for keeping the operation of markets under review, and considering allegations of anti-competitive behaviour, abuse of monopoly power or restrictive trade practices, including price fixing.

As part of his responsibilities, the Director General will keep under review compliance with the Order made by my right. hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on 19 May 1998, following the 1997 Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on the supply of eight categories of domestic electrical goods. The Order prohibits suppliers of those goods from recommending retail prices to retailers, and from influencing the prices at which retailers sell their goods, and comes into force on 1 September 1998.

Branded Goods

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will take steps to ensure that United Kingdom consumers continue to benefit from high street retailers importing branded goods from outside the EU on a parallel basis. [51217]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Under present United Kingdom legislation (the Trade Marks Act 1994) trade mark rights cannot be used to prevent or control parallel importation into this country of genuine goods, that is, goods already put on the market by, or with the consent of, trade mark owners, but this reduction in their rights applies only to goods put on the market in the European Economic Area (EEA). Under current legislation, goods put on the market outside the EEA do not come within this exception. Trade mark owners may, if they wish, use their rights to prevent or control the importation into the United Kingdom of such goods. However, the effects of the exercise of rights in this way is subject to the requirements of European and domestic law governing supply and competition.

The issue of parallel importation from outside the EEA into EC Member States is important for the operation of the European Single Market. The European Commission is currently undertaking a major study to investigate the economic effects of the use of trade marks and other intellectual property rights in relation to parallel importation. We will consider the results of this work very carefully when they emerge towards the beginning of next year, and we intend to take a strong part in the discussions and decisions which follow.

The Trade Marks Act implements Directive 89/104/EC.

In implementing, the UK Parliament, along with all other Member States, took the view that the Directive required that trade mark owners should be able to use their rights to control or prevent parallel imports from non-EEA countries. This is reflected in the UK Act at Section 12. A recent case before the ECJ (the Silhouette case) questioned this interpretation. The judgment confirms that this interpretation is correct.

The Commission's study into intellectual property rights and their effects on parallel importation was instigated following Dutch objections to provisions in a Directive concerning industrial designs protection, which provisions mirror those of the trade marks Directive.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Breed: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what measures she will take to ensure that fuel poverty does not increase as a result of the introduction of competition into the gas and electricity supply industries; and if she will make a statement. [50927]

Mr. Battle: The Green Paper "A Fair Deal for Consumers: Modernising the Framework for Utility Regulation" highlighted a particular concern that disadvantaged consumers may be benefiting least from emerging competition in gas and electricity supply. Competition has, and will, continue to benefit all consumers in these markets by driving prices down and services standards and choice up. But it is important that these benefits should be enjoyed fairly by all. The gas and electricity regulators and energy companies, in consultation with consumer representative bodies, were therefore asked to draw up an action plan to ensure that disadvantaged consumers benefit from improved efficiency, more choice, and greater fairness. That action plan has now been received and is being considered carefully, along with the many representations submitted on these issues. The President of the Board of Trade will be announcing the Government's response as soon as possible.

Nuclear Safety

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will place in the Library a copy of the 93+2 protocol on international nuclear safeguards agreed in June between Euratom, IAEA and other relevant parties. [51400]

Mr. Battle: I have arranged for a copy of the Council Decision of 8 June approving the three Additional Protocols, with the text of the three Additional protocols attached as annexes, to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The three Additional Protocols were also approved by the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency on 11 June.

We expect the agreement to be published in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* in due course.

Aerospace Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the impact on the United Kingdom aerospace industry of the award of the contract to Airbus Industrie to provide aircraft for US Airways. [51038]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The UK's industrial partner in Airbus, British Aerospace, has a 20 per cent. stake in Airbus which brings considerable

economic benefits to the UK. Airbus and related businesses support 25,000 UK jobs in 300 companies, and contribute £1 billion to the UK trade balance. Airbus is an excellent example of European industrial co-operation. In the first half of this year Airbus has estimated that it has won 52 per cent. of the world market for large civil aircraft.

The US Airways order was for up to thirty A330–300 aircraft, comprising 7 firm orders, 7 options, and 16 reserved production positions. The 14 orders and options are estimated to be worth over $1,500 million. Orders such as this demonstrate Airbus' continuing technical and commercial excellence.

Departmental Invoices

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of her Department's invoices were paid within the target period during the last year; and what was the figure for each of the three preceding years. [50014]

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Small Firms, Trade and Industry will publish details of the payment performance of all Government Departments for the 1997–98 financial year before the Summer Recess. Following is the information for the Department of Trade and Industry, for the three preceding years:

	Percentage
1994–95	84
1995–96	93
1996–97	97.9

Export Licences

Yvette Cooper: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will place in the Library statistics on export licences issued and refused for the period 1 January to 1 March 1997. [51650]

Mrs. Beckett: The statistics on export licences issued and refused for this period were placed in the House Library today.

Acquired Rights Directive

Mr. Boswell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research she has conducted on whether former local authority employees transferring employment under the Acquired Rights Directive are likely to receive their full anticipated retirement pension in cases of one or more subsequent transfers of employment. [51248]

Mr. Ian McCartney: None. The coverage of occupational pensions is, however, one of the issues that the Government have under active consideration in the context of their intended revision of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 (the TUPE Regulations) which implement the Acquired Rights Directive in the UK.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she plans to publish the results of the review of renewable energy policy; and if she will make a statement. [50827]

Mr. Battle: The Government expect to make an announcement about the Review later in the summer.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research she has commissioned to assess the potential of renewable energy in contributing to the Government's 12.5 per cent. target for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. [51317]

Mr. Battle: In June 1997 the Government initiated a review of new and renewable energy policy, including what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10 per cent. of the UK's electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010, and what contribution new and renewable technologies could make to meeting greenhouse gas reduction commitments. The Review is considering, inter alia, the current status and potential of the relevant new and renewable energy technologies. The Review is also addressing the need for research, development, demonstration and dissemination, and the barriers to the deployment of new and renewable energy and the measures which may be necessary to overcome them.

The Government expect to make an announcement about the Review later this summer.

Business Links

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the latest survey of Business Links' level of activity, with particular reference to the number of small businesses using Business Links. [50013]

Mrs. Roche: In the period January to March 1998 just over 112,000 businesses in England used Business Link. Of those of known size, over 56,000 of these businesses had less than 10 employees, and more than 29,000 had from 10 to 49 employees.

Sombrero Island (Rocket-launching Platform)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to discuss with the Government and Governor of Anguilla the plans of Beale Aerospace to build a rocket-launching platform on Sombrero Island. [50127]

Mr. Battle: The Government's approach to the proposal by Beale Aerospace to develop a satellite launch site on Sombrero Island is being co-ordinated by the British National Space Centre (BNSC) which is seeking advice on the proposal from a range of Government Departments. Officials from BNSC are in close contact

with both the Governor of Anguilla and officials from the Anguillan Government. I have no immediate plans to discuss the issue with the Governor or Government personally.

Science and Engineering Research

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) how much of the proposed £1.1 billion extra spending on science and engineering research will be spent in the North West; [51040]

(2) where the extra funding recently announced for science and engineering research will be spent in the North West. [51039]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade will make decisions on the allocation of the Science Budget in the usual way, being advised by the Director General of Research Councils (DGRC). Decisions on the Research Council's programmes will be announced in the Autumn. The Research Councils and other funded bodies will then take decisions on the basis of the quality of the proposal and its relevance to sustainable growth and quality of life. The arrangements for the £600 million joint Infrastructure Fund with the Wellcome Trust will involve the peer review of proposals, as agreed between the DGRC and the Director of the Wellcome Trust. It is not possible to specify in advance which research proposals at which universities/institutes will get funding.

European Monetary Union

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade in what ways she has been involved in the Government's consideration of European monetary union. [13040]

Mrs. Beckett: My Department is playing a full role in the key task of ensuring that British business is fully ready for the launch of the euro on 1 January next year. We are also working with business on what we must do to prepare for possible UK entry. In this way, the UK could be in a position to join early in the next parliament if the single currency is successful and if Government, Parliament and the people agree.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to answer the questions for answer on *(a)* 29 October 1997 (13040), *(b)* 28 January (25826), *(c)* 25 June (47544) and *(d)* 29 June (48339) from the right hon. Member for Wokingham. [51441]

Mrs. Beckett: I have answered q13040 today. The delay arose because the question did not appear in the electronic system used to transmit such information to my Parliamentary Branch, and we were thus unaware it had been tabled. Action has been taken which should prevent this recurring.

Q25826 was answered on 3 February and the text will appear in the bound volume of the *Official Report*.

I have answered q48339 today and will answer q47544 shortly.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Hon. Members (Facilities)

37. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the President of the Council what steps she is taking to improve the range of facilities available to hon. Members to increase the effectiveness of their offices. [49613]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Accommodation and Works, Administration, Broadcasting and Information Committees have responsibilities which affect the effectiveness of Members offices and I am sure that those Committees would be willing to consider any specific matters within their terms of reference which my hon. Friend wishes to raise.

Staff Costs

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on the impact on staff costs per week of the House sitting in August. [49609]

Mr. Kirkwood: Staff of the House are paid on an annual basis. If the House were to sit in August, the additional staff costs would therefore be confined to overtime and additional hours payments together with the cost of late night transport. The precise amount would depend on the hours of Sitting but could be of the order of £10,000 per week.

Refreshment Department

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee what ethical and environmental policies are in place in respect of the purchasing of food by the Refreshment Department. [49860]

Mr. Dennis Turner: In the purchasing of food, the Refreshment Department not only considers the price being offered, but also takes into account criteria such as the quality and wholesomeness of the produce available, food safety issues and consumer confidence; the latter requires the Department's procurement officer to be aware of ethical and environmental issues relating to the food chain and to advise the Department's management in order that customer confidence can be maintained at all times.

The Refreshment Department maintains purchasing guidelines which include the following food-related issues:

1. animal husbandry and, in particular, the procurement of fresh meat and poultry only from sources approved under an accredited 'farm assurance' scheme;
2. the purchase of 'dolphin friendly' tinned and fresh tuna;
3. the purchase of free-range eggs only;
4. the purchase of coffee which has been accredited by the Fairtrade Foundation;
5. to support the aims of the Lomé Convention, specifically with reference to the purchase of Caribbean bananas and cane sugar;
6. to encourage food suppliers to minimise the use of packaging materials and wherever practicable, to use packaging manufactured from recycled materials;
7. to maximise the recycling of food packaging, disposable products, glass, plastics, cans and waste oils;

8. to maintain close contacts with organisations such as Freedom Foods, the Soil Association, the Fairtrade Foundation and others who operate schemes promoting the availability and quality of ethical or environmentally-friendly foods; in particular, to work with and encourage such organisations to extend their schemes into the catering food supply chain;

9. to avoid, wherever identifiable, the procurement of foods which contain genetically modified organisms.

PDVN

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee what was the cost of the Parliamentary Data and Video Network in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [51021]

Mr. Allan: The Capital and Revenue cost of providing the PDVN, in the financial year 1997–98, including expenditure on upgrade and improvement projects, but excluding expenditure on IT from the Office Cost Allowance and money spent by Departments of the House in providing information services on the PDVN (such as POLIS) was £2,207,000. Associated staff costs over the same period were an additional £647,000. It is estimated that some £750,000 was spent by the House of Commons on PDVN cabling in 1997–98.

HEALTH

Medicines (Children)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate the newly established system for licensing medicines for the treatment of children in the United States of America and the advantages and disadvantages of such a system for the United Kingdom. [43821]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 1 June 1998]:* There is a newly established system for licensing medicines for the treatment of children in the United States of America. There have been recent amendments and proposed amendments to the already existing legislation which applies to the licensing of medicinal products for the treatment of all age groups.

In December 1994 the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published the Final Rule on paediatric labelling. The Final Rule required applicants to examine their existing data for already approved drugs to determine whether there was enough information to permit a paediatric indication. If appropriate, applicants were to apply for the addition to their licence by April 1997. This rule has not been very successful in adding paediatric age groups to existing licences as the available data were generally inadequate.

In November 1997 the FDA Modernisation Act of 1997 was signed into law. Section 111 deals with paediatric studies of drugs. Where appropriate, studies are encouraged in children for all newly authorised drugs so that new medicines will be available for use in children. For certain already approved drugs (list published in May 1998) applicants will be required to carry out studies in paediatric age groups with the aim of obtaining a licence for use in children. The Act allows 6 extra months of market exclusivity for pharmaceutical manufacturers who conduct acceptable studies in children of drugs identified by the FDA for which paediatric information would be beneficial.

There is also a proposed rule, published in August 1997, which would require manufacturers to conduct studies in children if requested to do so by the FDA. If the incentives in the Modernisation Act are successful this additional regulation may be unnecessary.

The spirit of these amendments is reflected in new European guidance on licensing medicines in children which came into operation in September 1997[1]. The United Kingdom played a major role in developing this new guidance which strongly encourages the pharmaceutical industry to develop medicines for use in children. It states that clinical trials in children should be submitted to the regulatory authorities as soon as possible if a product is likely to be of benefit to children or widely used in that age group.

In the European Union there is no legal requirement to conduct studies in children although a change to the Directives may be considered if companies do not respond to the new guideline. There is no extra market exclusivity in the EU for applicants who conduct studies in children.

[1] CPMP/EWP/462/95: Note for Guidance on clinical investigation of medicinal products in children.

Action Zones

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the initiatives undertaken by his Department since 1 May 1997 which have involved the establishment of *(a)* action zones and *(b)* pilot schemes limited to particular geographical areas, indicating the name of the programme and the action zone or pilot scheme areas covered in each instance. [47060]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Pharmacists

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies he has commissioned into the role of pharmacists in the National Health Service. [48231]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 1 July 1998]:* A number of pilot projects have been funded by the Department to appraise the value to the National Health Service of community pharmacists providing a wider range of services. There were 17 pilots on prescribing advice during 1995–96 and there are currently six pilot projects on repeat and instalment dispensing (whereby patients receive certain medicines dispensed in instalments) and a further six pilot projects evaluating services to help various patient groups to obtain best outcomes from their medicines. In addition, the Department has commissioned specific pieces of research relevant to the role of community pharmacists from university departments. The results will inform decisions on which if any of these services proceed to implementation.

We propose to publish a document in the autumn setting out proposals for the future role of community pharmacy within the NHS.

Family Planning

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list, by health authority, the number of nurses waiting for a place on the ENB family planning course; [48966]

(2) if he will list, by health authority, the number of places available for nurses to take the ENB family planning course. [48967]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested for the number of nurses waiting for a place on the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting family planning course is not collected centrally in the format requested.

There are currently 3,952 approved places per annum on education programmes in family planning and reproductive sexual health. This is broken down by region as follows:

Region	*Number*
Anglia and Oxford	407
Northern and Yorkshire	550
North Thames	715
South Thames	607
North West	330
South and West	428
Trent	560
West Midlands	355

Source:
English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting

Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many formal complaints were made to the Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [48950]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is in the table:

Table: Number of written complaints for Essex Rivers Healthcare National Health Service Trust 1992–93 to 1996–97

Year	*Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust*
1992–93	388
1993–94	609
1994–95	563
1995–96	431
1996–97[1]	492

[1] Department of Health publication, Handling complaints: monitoring the NHS complaints procedure, England 1996–97
Source:
Department of Health publications, Written complaints by, or on behalf of, patients, England, 1992–93 to 1995–96.

Social Service Provision (London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what additional costs are incurred within London in the social service provision of adult care *(a)* in residential establishments and *(b)* in the community; and what allowance is made for this in the funding of London local government; [49441]

(2) what additional costs he estimates are incurred within London in the social service provision of children's care; and what allowance he makes for this in his Department's funding of such provision. [49419]

Ms Jowell: The Government's estimates of the costs of providing social services are reflected in local authorities' standard spending assessment (SSAs). SSAs for 1998–99, per head of population of the relevant age-group, for London authorities, non-London authorities, and all English authorities, are shown in the table.

£ per head

	London	*England outside London*	*England*
Residential services for the elderly	485	343	361
Non-residential services for the elderly	270	206	213
Services for adults aged 18 and 64 years	80	46	51
Children's services	346	162	132

Chiropody

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each relevant NHS trust *(a)* the number of patient contacts with the chiropody service, *(b)* the number of chiropody staff employed and *(c)* total expenditure on community chiropody services in each of the last three years. [49551]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* Information about the number of patient contacts with their chiropody services for each National Health Service trust is contained in the Department of Health publication "Chiropody services, summary information, England". Copies of the summary information for 1994–95, 1995–96 and 1996–97, the latest year available, are available in the Library.

Copies of the information about the number of chiropody staff employed in each NHS trust in the last three years up to 1996–97, the latest year available, will be placed in the Library.

NHS trusts provide figures for total expenditure on community chiropody services in the annual financial returns. Analysis of these data by individual trust in England for the years 1994–95 to 1996–97 are available in the Library.

Mental Health Challenge Fund

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the cases of misuse of Mental Health Challenge Fund moneys which have been uncovered by *(a)* audit and *(b)* other means; and if he will make a statement. [50074]

Ms Jowell: We are not aware of any misuse of Mental Health Challenge Fund moneys.

NHS Magazine

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost to the National Health Service, net of advertising, sponsorship and sales, of the production and distribution of the NHS Magazine in each month since its introduction; and what its budget is for the next 12 months. [50130]

Ms Jowell: The "NHS Magazine", which was first published in June 1995, acts as a vehicle for sharing best practice within the National Health Service. It also carries

the most up to date quarterly data about NHS performance, helping to ensure the service remains accountable to those it serves.

The new costs of production of each issue of the magazine, all of which have been met from the communications budget of the NHS Executive, were:

Date	Net Cost (£)	Costs per issue (pence)
Summer 1995	33,711	1.12
Autumn 1995	31,276	0.89
Winter 1995	27,611	0.79
Spring 1996	30,169	0.86
Summer 1996	26,812	0.72
Autumn 1996	33,154	0.95
Winter 1996	35,536	1
Spring 1997	29,815	0.85
Summer 1997	32,491	0.90
Autumn 1997	29,959	0.83
Winter 1997	40,285	1.15
Spring 1998	41,468	1.18
Summer 1998	50,030	1

Distribution costs of the magazine were met from a central Departmental budget and cannot be readily identified separately.There is no separately identified budget for the future production costs of the magazine, which will continue to be met from within the NHS Executive's overall budget.

Organophosphates

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data his Department has collected on synergetic or potentiating effects of exposure to organophosphates to an individual taking the H2 inhibitors Cimetidine and Ranatidine. [50417]

Ms Jowell: We are not aware of any data on possible interactions of organophosphates and human medicines containing H2 inhibitors.

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has evaluated into the effects on pulmonary, immune, neurological and psychoneurological functions of infants and young children exposed to organophosphates used domestically; and if he will make a statement. [50530]

Ms Jowell: The Pesticides Safety Directorate, an agency of the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, is responsible for the registration and safety evaluation of pesticides for amateur garden use in Great Britain. The Department has not evaluated any research into the effects on pulmonary, immune, neurological and psychoneurological functions of infants and young children exposed to organophosphates used domestically in gardens.

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the correlation between the incidence of asthma in children of sheep farmers and *(a)* sheep dipping and *(b)* spraying of crops with organophosphates. [50529]

Ms Jowell: The Department's policy research programme (PRP) and the central National Health Service research and development programmes are not currently supporting any research into the correlation between the incidence of asthma in children of sheep farmers and sheep dipping and spraying crops with organophosphates. The Medical Research Council, which is funded by the Office of Science and Technology, commissions most of the Government's research into bio-medical and clinical issues. The Council is always open to new sound scientific proposals in competition with other applications. The Department's PRP supports the formulation of health and social care policies and the NHS programmes support the needs of the health service. Records are not held centrally of all research carried out in the NHS.

Antidepressants

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cost to the NHS of antidepressants prescribed by community pharmacists in England in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1997; and what proportion of this was attributable to SSRIs. [50444]

Mr. Milburn: Pharmacists do not prescribe any medication. The information on prescriptions written by doctors is shown in the table.

The net ingredient cost of prescription items dispensed in the community for antidepressant drugs and selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), 1996 and 1997
England

	1996		1997	
	£ million	percentage	£ million	percentage
SSRIs	142.3	74	183.0	77
Other antidepressants	49.0	26	56.2	23
Total for antidepressant drugs	191.2	100	239.1	100

Notes:
1. Antidepressant drugs are those described in the British National Formulary (BNF) section 4.3, "Antidepressant drugs". The therapeutic classifications are based on BNF, Number 32 (September 1996)
2. The data cover all prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered
3. The net ingredient cost refers to the cost of the drug before discounts and does not include any dispensing costs or fees. It does not include any adjustment for income obtained where a prescription charge is paid at the time the prescription is dispensed or where the patient has purchased a pre-payment certificate

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what quantity of each type of antidepressant was prescribed by community pharmacists in England in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1997. [50445]

Mr. Milburn: Pharmacists do not prescribe any medication. The information on prescriptions written by doctors is shown in the table.

Number of prescription items dispensed in the community for antidepressant drugs, 1996 and 1997
England

Thousand

Drug group	1996	1997
Tricyclic and related antidepressant drugs		
Dothiepin Hydrochloride	3,357	3,389
Amitriptyline Hydrochloride	2,787	3,062
Lofepramine Hydrochloride	918	894
Clomipramine Hydrochloride	529	516
Imipramine Hydrochloride	424	407

Number of prescription items dispensed in the community for antidepressant drugs, 1996 and 1997
England

Thousand

Drug group	*1996*	*1997*
Trazodone Hydrochloride	274	324
Trimipramine Maleate	300	281
Doxepin	171	165
Nortriptyline	158	151
Mianserin Hydrochloride	103	85
Amitriptyline Embonate	29	28
Maprotiline Hydrochloride	24	21
Protriptyline Hydrochloride	12	11
Amoxapine	11	9
Mirtazapine	—	8
Desipramine Hydrochloride	8	6
Viloxazine Hydrochloride	1	1
Total for Tricyclic and related antidepressant drugs	9,106	9,358
Monoamine-Oxidase Ihibitors (Maois)		
Tranylcypromine Sulphate	50	45
Pheneizine Sulphate	47	44
Moclobemide	48	43
Isocarboxazid	9	8
Total for Monoamine-Oxidase Inhibitors (Maois)	153	140
SSRIs and related antidepressants		
Fluoxetine Hydrochloride	2,514	3,036
Paroxetine Hydrochloride	1,692	2,287
Sertraline Hydrochloride	727	905
Venlafaxine	176	364
Citalopram	126	264
Nefazodone Hydrochloride	88	101
Fluvoxamine Maleate	77	63
Total for SSRIs and related antidepressants	5,400	7,021
Other antidepressant drugs		
Flupenthixol Hydrochloride	298	293
Reboxetine	—	7
Tryptophan	4	4
Total for other antidepressant drugs	302	304
Total for all antidepressant drugs	14,961	16,823

Notes:

1. Antidepressant drugs are those described in the British National Formulary (BNF) section 4.3, "Antidepressant drugs". The therapeutic classifications are based on BNF, Number 32 (September 1996)
2. The data cover all prescriptions dispensed in the community, ie by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered

Bristol Royal Infirmary

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the public aspects of the public inquiry into cardiac surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary will start; what factors will determine the start date; and if he will make a statement. [50479]

Mr. Milburn: It is our intention to begin the public inquiry as soon as is practicable. Following my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's oral announcement on 18 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 529–39, Professor Ian Kennedy is currently considering all aspects of the inquiry which he will be leading, including the terms of reference and the selection of other panel members. We will be making a further announcement shortly.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if Her Majesty's Government will meet the costs of group legal representation for families bereaved following malpractice at Bristol Royal Infirmary. [50478]

Mr. Milburn: Issues concerning the terms of reference of the Inquiry and participation in it are still be decided.

Benzodiazepines

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what quantity of each individual type of benzodiazepine was prescribed by community pharmacists in England in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1997. [50446]

Mr. Milburn: Pharmacists do not prescribe any medication. The information on prescriptions written by doctors is shown in the table.

Benzodiazepines: number of prescription items dispensed in the community
England, 1996 and 1997

Thousand

Drug group	*1996*	*1997*
Temazepam	5,540	5,252
Diazepam	3,600	3,798
Nitrazepam	2,539	2,426
Lorazepam	785	758
Chlordiazepoxide	428	423
Oxazepam	304	306
Lormetazepam	234	249
Loprazolam	221	215
Clonazepam	180	196
Clobazam	74	74
Triazolam	0	0
Totals	13,905	13,698

Notes:

1. Date cover all prescriptions dispensed in the community, i.e. by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered
2. An "0" indicates less than 500 prescription items
3. Figures may not add up due to rounding

Hepatitis C

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to provide financial assistance for people with haemophilia infected with the hepatitis C virus. [50436]

Ms Jowell: We are considering the representations which have been made to us on this subject and will announce the outcome as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Cancer

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money his Department spent in each of the last three years on research into *(a)* breast *(b)* lung and *(c)* prostate cancer. [50206]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* We are committed to encouraging research into the causes, prevention, early detection and treatment of all cancers.

Departmental expenditure on research into *(a)* breast, *(b)* lung and *(c)* prostate cancer is:

£000

	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98
Breast cancer			
Department's policy research programme (PRP)	849	637	304
National Health Service research and development programme	123	316	528
Total	972	953	832
Lung cancer			
Department's PRP	144	231	0
NHS research and development	27	197	187
Total	171	428	187
Prostate cancer			
Department's PRP	20	21	17
NHS research and development	49	47	12
Total	69	68	29

In addition, the Medical Research Council (which is funded by grant-in-aid from the Department of Trade and Industry and is the main agency through which the Government support medical and clinical research) invested in 1997–98: £3.3 million in breast cancer research, £691,000 in lung cancer research and £18,000 in prostate cancer research.Cancer charities and industry are also major investors, spending an estimated total of £122 million and £115 million per year respectively on cancer research.

NHS resources also support the NHS service costs of projects funded by non-commercial funders of research and development. This could include cancer research projects in the above areas.

Departmental resources going into cancer research complement these other funders, and the fluctuating spend stems from the cycle of commissioning as projects and programmes start and finish rather than any established policy to change funding levels.

NHS Trust Boards

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women he has appointed to National Health Service trust boards since 1 May 1997. [50731]

Mr. Milburn: Since 1 May 1997 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has appointed 469 women and 451 men as non-executive directors of National Health Service trusts, including chairmen.

Health Visitors

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of ending the separate registration of health visitors on public safety and quality of nursing care. [50829]

Mr. Milburn: This is an issue which was raised during the consultation stage of the current review of the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979. United Kingdom Health Ministers expect to receive the review report shortly and will be considering its recommendations over the summer.

Nursing Students

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to implement the increase to non-means-tested nursing student bursaries announced at the recent Royal College of Nursing Congress. [51208]

Mr. Milburn: 1 September 1998.

General Practitioner Lists

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people *(a)* in total and *(b)* aged over state retirement age, were removed from their general practitioner list in 1997. [51146]

Mr. Milburn: Information on the number of people removed from their general practitioner's list is collected annually and is published in the GMP Census Additional Data Collection, copies of which are available in the Library.

The latest published information relates to the year 1995–96.

No information is held centrally analysing these figures within age bands.

Medical Records

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he has taken to ensure that patients are not obstructed from access to their medical records by general practitioners. [51043]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* All general practitioners are bound by the provisions of the Access to Health Records Act 1990 and the Department has issued clear guidance on the operation of the Act. When instances of apparent flagrant violation of the Act are brought to our attention (for example excessive charging), we have written to the record-holder concerned reminding them of their responsibilities under the Act. Further, since 1 April 1996, patients have been able to pursue complaints about any aspect of how an application under the Act has been handled under the National Health Service Complaints Procedure. This provides an opportunity for the complaint to be heard by an independent review panel if local complaints officers are unable to resolve the matter satisfactorily.

Linear Accelerators

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the Royal College of Radiologists' recent report, if he will assess the cost to public funds of *(a)* providing 48 new linear accelerators and *(b)* replacing 44 existing linear accelerators. [50949]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Linear accelerators cost around £1 million each depending on local circumstances such as the model selected and optional extras. The pair of reports from the Royal College of Radiologists will provide valuable information for local planning of services; the National Health Service Executive, health authorities and trusts will find them useful for formulating and assessing proposals for radiotherapy services.

Residential and Domiciliary Care

Mr. Burst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the percentage increase in charges to service users for *(a)* domiciliary care services, *(b)* day care and *(c)* meals on wheels for the latest year for which figures are available for each local authority. [51508]

Ms Jowell: Information on charges made to individuals for social services provision is not collected centrally. However, the total amounts reported by local authorities as having been received from clients in the form of fees and charges, in 1996–97, for different services are collected centrally, and are available in the form of computer tables on the DH World Wide Web pages for all local authorities in England (Internet reference *http:\\www.open.gov.uk/doh/public/pss—stat.htm).*

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons his Department has not issued guidance under section 7 of the Local Government Act 1970 to local authorities on the provisions of section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983. [51503]

Ms Jowell: Section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 places a duty on health authorities and local social services authorities to provide after-care services to a specified group of patients. It is a responsibility imposed on both authorities. Guidance on section 117 is contained in the Code of Practice to the Mental Health Act 1983.

Spinal Cord Injuries

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what is the incidence of spinal cord injury; [49724]

(2) how many people with spinal cord injury were awaiting admission into a spinal injury Unit in each year from 1990 to 1997; [49725]

(3) what is the total number of beds in spinal injury units; [49726]

(4) how many people with spinal cord injuries waiting for a bed in a spinal injury unit were *(a)* dealt with in the community and *(b)* admitted to a district general hospital in each year between 1990 and 1997; [49727]

(5) what assessment he has made of the protocol for the treatment of spinal cord injuries drawn up by the Spinal Injuries Association. [49898]

Ms Jowell: Information on the incidence of spinal cord injury is not held centrally. However, estimates based upon the number of hospital admissions suggest that there are about 400 new cases of spinal cord injury in England each year. We know this figure is an overestimate, since spinal injury patients who are transferred to Spinal Injuries Units in other trusts will count as two admissions.

Data on waiting times for individual procedures are not collected centrally. Information on people waiting for a bed in a spinal injury unit and where they were treated is not available.

1995–96 was the last financial year in which bed data were collected separately for spinal unit wards. In 1996–97, beds in spinal units were added to beds in other units and classified as "Younger Physically Disabled". The information is given in the table. Information on beds is contained in the publication "Bed availability and occupancy for England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Table: Average daily number of available beds in Younger Physically Disabled wards, open night and day (ie 24 hours) England, 1995–96 and 1996–97

	1995–96 Number	*1995–96 Per cent.*	*1996–97 Number*	*1996–97 Per cent.*
Younger Physically Disabled	1,364	100	[1]1,294	100
Spinal Unit	221	16.2	—	—
Other	1,143	83.8	—	—

[1] Figure includes spinal units and other units

Source:

1. Bed Availability for England, 1995–96
2. Bed Availability for England, 1996–97

The Department is aware of the protocol drawn up by the Spinal Injuries Association. At present, the drawing up of guidelines for good practice in any area of medicine, including spinal injury, is a matter for the Medical Royal Colleges.

Dental Services

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the funding provision of NHS dentistry in Herefordshire. [51249]

Mr. Milburn: The amount spent on general dental services is dependent upon the activity of National Health Service dentists. Dentists providing general dental services receive payment from the NHS for the dental treatment and care they provide.

Residential Care

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide guidance to local authorities on the funding responsibility for residential accommodation for elderly people who have chosen to move from a residential home in one council's area to a residential home in another council's area. [51225]

Ms Jowell: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State gave the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) on 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *453*.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disabled Student Allowance

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if local education authorities are required to follow national criteria when allocating disabled student allowance; and if he will make a statement. [51427]

Dr. Howells: Disabled Students Allowances can be paid by local education authorities to students who can prove that they have a disability or medical condition which affects their ability to study. These allowances are payable as part of a mandatory award. The Mandatory Awards Regulations therefore provide the legal framework under which LEAs administer the allowances.

They have written guidance from my Department available to them on how to assess a student's eligibility for these allowances within that framework.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if businesses contributing in cash or in kind to education action zones will be prevented from entering into any form of preferred trading agreements with the schools in those zones, or with the Education Action Forum; and how such arrangements will be monitored. [51307]

Mr. Byers: Education Action Forums must secure best value in any contract they enter into. We will be issuing guidance to them on how to do this.

Each Forum will be under a legal duty to send its accounts to the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Comptroller and Auditor General will report on them to Parliament.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he has set for the receipt of contributions in kind from businesses involved in the education action zones. [51303]

Mr. Byers: Each zone will raise £250,000 a year in cash or kind from the private sector.

Contact Sports (Gum Shields)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice his Department provides to schools on the use of gum shields in contact sports. [51389]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not issue advice to schools on the use of gum shields in contact sports.

The National Curriculum for physical education requires schools to ensure safe practice and to teach pupils why particular protection is worn for different activities.

School Meals (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost of the fixed-price school meals provided by Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire education authorities for the most recent five years for which records are available. [51125]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not collect this information.

Industrial Accidents and Illnesses

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average estimated cost to public funds of an industrial accident or illness resulting in *(a)* death, *(b)* serious injury incapacitating the victim from further employment, *(c)* other serious injury and *(d)* minor injury; and if he will make a statement. [50627]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The costs to public funds of work-related accidents or work-related ill-health arise principally through social security payments and medical provision. However, the records maintained do not enable the costs to public funds of injury accidents or ill-health arising from work activities to be separately identified.

Students (St. Helena)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what financial help has been given in each of the last five years towards the education costs of young people from St. Helena studying in the United Kingdom. [50707]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

Since 1993 the overseas aid programme to St. Helena has provided the sum of £659,542 towards the education costs of St. Helenians studying in the United Kingdom which is broken down in each of the last five years as follows:

1993–94: £144,365

1994–95: £102,740

1995–96: £143,472

1996–97: £166,804

1997–98: £102,161.

Easternside Primary School, Middlesbrough

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria were used in determining the need for an OFSTED inspection of Easternside Primary School in Middlesbrough within three years of the previous inspection. [50874]

Mr. Byers: The timing of school inspections is a matter for Ofsted. Easternside Primary School, Middlesbrough, was inspected in July 1995 and I understand that HM Chief Inspector has arranged for the school to be inspected in October 1998. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend, to explain the reasons for that decision, and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Beacon Schools

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what procedures are in place to assess the effectiveness of the investment of extra resources in beacon schools. [50910]

Mr. Byers: Each beacon school will be required to produce an annual report accounting for the additional expenditure and assessing the impact of its activities on raising standards in other schools. Those schools receiving support and advice from beacon schools will also be asked to evaluate its impact.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what basis beacon schools were selected; and what involvement local education authorities had in the process. [50954]

Mr. Byers: The beacon schools were selected from those commended in Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools' latest Annual Report as the best performing during 1996–97. Local Education Authorities were not involved in the process.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of beacon schools on the planning of school admission limits and the management of empty places in schools. [50911]

Mr. Byers: Beacon schools will have no impact on the planning of school admissions limits or the management of empty places in schools.

Education Spending

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *490*, what was the education standard spending assessment for (1) 1992–93, (b) 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98 and *(g)* 1998–99 for Hereford and Worcester local education authorities in (i) cash terms and (ii) 1998–99 prices for the categories (1) primary education, (2) secondary education, (3) post 16 education, (4) under-5 education and (5) other education. [50431]

Mr. Byers: The following tables set out the five education SSA sub-blocks for Hereford and Worcester local education authority for each year since 1992–93 in cash terms and in 1998–99 prices. It is not possible to calculate underlying year-on-year changes, adjusted for all local authority changes of function, at the level of individual SSA sub-blocks.

Hereford and Worcester local education authority

£ million cash terms

Year	*Primary*	*Secondary*	*Post-16*	*Under-fives*	*Other*
1992–93	81.9	94.0	46.7	9.3	10.0
1993–94	82.6	95.7	13.7	9.4	10.2
1994–95	86.0	97.1	13.6	10.6	9.2
1995–96	88.3	96.9	14.1	11.0	9.6
1996–97	94.0	99.7	14.2	11.8	9.3
1997–98	98.3	100.8	15.3	8.2	8.2
1998–99	104.7	105.6	15.5	11.7	7.5

£ million at 1998–99 prices

Year	*Primary*	*Secondary*	*Post-16*	*Under-fives*	*Other*
1992–93	95.6	109.7	54.5	10.9	11.7
1993–94	93.8	108.6	15.6	10.6	11.6
1994–95	96.1	108.5	15.2	11.8	10.3
1995–96	96.0	105.4	15.3	12.0	10.5
1996–97	99.3	105.4	15.0	12.5	9.8
1997–98	101.1	103.7	15.7	8.4	8.5
1998–99	104.7	105.6	15.5	11.7	7.5

Notes:

1. All figures in table 1 are in £ million cash terms
2. All figures in table 2 are in £ million at 1998–99 prices
3. The figures for 1998–99 represent the aggregate totals for Herefordshire and Worcestershire

Schools (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money local education authority schools in Worcestershire held in reserves *(a)* as a total amount (cash), *(b)* in real terms at 1998 prices and *(c)* as a percentage of the total available to be spent on schools in each year since 1991–92. [50920]

Mr. Byers: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Key Stage 2 and 3

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will make a statement about the problems which delayed the provision of Key Stage 2 results to certain schools this year; [50385]

(2) what measures are being undertaken by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to ensure that the problems in making available this year's Key Stage 2 results do not occur again. [50386]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) are responsible for the collection and notification of Key Stage 2 results to schools. The problems affecting this year's exercise also apply to Key Stage 3 test results.

The Department was informed by QCA that there were significant problems, primarily relating to delays in the completion of the necessary work. On being informed we immediately told QCA to take action as a matter of urgency to both minimise disruption to schools and to ensure the accuracy and quality of results.

On 14 July QCA wrote to all schools explaining that it would not be possible to notify all results before the end of the summer term but that all schools would receive a complete set of accurate results by the end of August at the latest.

Ministers regard this whole episode as being an unacceptable state of affairs and an inquiry will be conducted to find the cause of the difficulties and to make sure this does not happen again.

The Chief Executive of QCA has written to all schools to apologise.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many schools will not receive their Key Stage 2 test results before the end of the summer term; [49508]

(2) how many schools have not received their *(a)* Key Stage 2 test results and *(b)* Key Stage 3 test results; [49509]

(3) what is the nature of the technical problems which have prevented the contractor employed to process and notify Key Stage 2 and 3 test results from completing the work on time; [49511]

(4) pursuant to his answer of 2 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *268*, concerning Key Stage 2 and 3 test results, if he will identify the contractor and place a copy of the contract in the Library. [49513]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 8 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) today.

The contract is commercial-in-confidence and not available for general inspection.

Charity Collectors

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 12 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *557*,

concerning charity collectors, what studies he has undertaken of the effectiveness of the precautions against jobcentres assisting recruitment of collectors for bogus charities; and if he will make a statement. [50398]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Adrian Sanders, dated 20 July 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning studies he has undertaken into the effectiveness of the precautions against Jobcentres assisting in the recruitment of collectors for bogus charities. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Since you last raised this issue, in November of last year, we have taken action to strengthen our guidance to Jobcentres in consultation with the Charity Commission.

As I explained in my reply to you in November 1997, our guidance already told Jobcentres not to accept vacancies from or on behalf of any charity unless it was registered with the Charity Commission or, in Scotland, the Financial Intermediary Claims Office (FICO). Where any doubt arises about the registration, or the actions of a charity, the local Jobcentre is now instructed to forward details to a team in the Employment Service Head Office in Sheffield for investigation. This team will check the organisation's registration with the Charity Commission or the Financial Intermediary Claims Office, as appropriate, and advise the Jobcentre whether or not to accept the vacancy. Where necessary we will ask the Charity Commission or the FICO to investigate the organisation. This will confirm whether the organisation is registered and whether the Commission or FICO, through their Investigations Division, are aware of any other information about them which would lead us to doubt whether their vacancies were suitable for display in Jobcentres. If the organisation is not registered, or the Commission expresses any doubt about them, the team will instruct Jobcentres not to display any vacancies from them.

These strengthened processes mean that a single team at our Head Office is now able quickly to tell Jobcentre staff about the steps they should take to safeguard jobseekers, and seek the advice of the Charity Commission or FICO about organisations whose activities are causing concern to staff or jobseekers. It also allows us to inform all our Jobcentres quickly of any organisations about which the Charity Commission or FICO have concerns and thus stop them accepting any vacancies from them.

You ask what studies we have undertaken on our precautions. We have not undertaken any specific research, although our Head Office team will themselves monitor carefully any feedback from our Jobcentres and from our clients about charities which appear to have doubts attaching to them. If you have any examples or problems of which you would like us to be aware we would of course, be very happy to investigate them.

I hope this is helpful.

DEFENCE

Territorial Army

15. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Territorial Army centres have been identified for *(a)* closure and *(b)* sale as part of his Department's efficiency savings. [49591]

Dr. Reid: Prior to the announcement of the Strategic Defence Review, and following its normal annual assessment of the usage of its assets my Department had identified 18 Territorial Army centres for closure and subsequent sale. In addition, and as an element of the Strategic Defence Review, we have already announced that the Duke of York's Headquarters in Chelsea will be sold and its Territorial Army occupants re-accommodated as necessary. Further closures will arise from the forthcoming restructuring of the Territorial Army, but we do not expect to be in a position to announce these until the autumn.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the likely effects of the measures announced in the Strategic Defence Review on the effectiveness of the Territorial Army. [49576]

Dr. Reid: The aim of the Strategic Defence Review has been to ensure that our forces are more capable of performing their primary defence tasks. The conclusions we have reached are designed to increase the utility and efficacy of our Armed Forces, of which our Reserve Forces are an important and fully integrated part. The improvements made by the Review will, therefore, enhance the effectiveness of the Territorial Army in the new strategic setting.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Strategic Defence Review, if he will make a statement on the future of the Territorial Army in Chorley. [51030]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Following the announcement of the results of the Strategic Defence Review, work has now commenced to establish the future organisation and structure of the Territorial Army. It is too early to say how this work will affect TA units in any particular area, but we expect to be in a position to make detailed announcements by the Autumn.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate how many fewer men and women on current retention rates will have served in the Territorial Army by the end of the year 2015 under the Government's plans for the future establishment of the TA compared to the current establishment. [49578]

Dr. Reid: We estimate that, based on current retention rates, some 68,000 fewer individuals will have served in the Territorial Army by the end of 2015 under our plans for the future establishment of the TA compared to the current establishment. This will represent a decline of no more than around 6 per cent. in the number of people who will have had some experience in the forces—excluding those gaining experience with the Combined Cadet Corps in schools.

Army (Recruitment)

16. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Army's most recent recruitment figures. [49592]

Dr. Reid: Recruitment is one of our highest priorities and we are therefore actively pursuing a number of recruiting initiatives. Reversing the problems we have inherited will take some time, but we are making promising headway. I am pleased to be able to report that as at 1 June we have 1,500 more people on the total strength than there were at 1 May last year.

Royal Navy (Anti-submarine Warfare)

17. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the anti-submarine warfare capability of the Royal Navy. [49593]

Dr. Reid: The Royal Navy continues to have a world-class anti-submarine warfare capability. However, the nature and scale of the submarine threat has changed since the end of the Cold War, towards a wide range of operations in coastal areas. We have decided therefore as part of the Strategic Defence Review to focus more on this threat and reduce the emphasis on open ocean operations.

United Nations Operations

18. **Mr. Lock:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to enhance the UN's ability to mount peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. [49594]

29. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to enhance the UN's ability to mount peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. [49605]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review has reaffirmed that the UK will continue to make an important military contribution to the United Nations. We are planning a significant UK initiative to underline the Government's commitment to support UN operations by declaring a much larger proportion of our front line capabilities as potentially available to the UN, including all of our rapidly deployable forces; and by incorporating this declaration in a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UN.

Defence Medical Services

19. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of the strategic defence review on the tri-service medical services. [49595]

20. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his plans for the Defence Medical Services. [49596]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review included measures to address current personnel and equipment shortfalls across all three Services as a matter of priority and to provide an acceptable level of medical support for deployed operations. These measures include recruiting approximately 250 hospital specialists, nurses, technicians and other personnel to bring the Defence Secondary Care Agency up to its manpower establishment.

As part of this major new initiative, we intend to enhance our arms control programme, including restoration of our 'Open Skies' air inspection capability; expand our Outreach and wider military assistance programmes, including greater use of attachments and short term training teams; revitalise our pool of defence attaches; and introduce new education and training initiatives, including a new defence diplomacy scholarship scheme. These measures will greatly enhance the British contribution to conflict prevention.

Diplomacy and Conflict Prevention

21. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department is taking to promote defence diplomacy and conflict prevention. [49597]

22. **Mr. Beard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department is taking to promote defence diplomacy and conflict prevention. [49598]

31. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department is taking to promote defence diplomacy and conflict prevention. [49607]

Mr. George Robertson: A key decision of the Strategic Defence Review was that defence diplomacy should become one of the eight core Missions of our Armed Forces. As part of this major new initiative, we intend to enhance our arms control programme, including restoration of our 'Open Skies' air inspection capability; expand our Outreach and wider military assistance programmes, including greater use of attachments and short term training terms; revitalise our pool of defence attaches; and introduce new education and training initiatives, including a new defence diplomacy scholarship scheme. These measures will greatly enhance the British contribution to conflict prevention.

Armed Forces (Training)

24. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in the armed forces are at present undertaking training which will lead to a formal qualification. [49600]

Dr. Reid: Formal qualifications are taken to mean civilian qualifications. The information requested is not held centrally by my Department and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, considerable numbers of Service personnel are studying for a variety of civilian qualifications at any given time.

Additionally, a large and growing proportion of Service training is now accredited by civilian award bodies.

As part of the Strategic Defence Review and our 'Policy for People', our new 'Learning Forces' initiative will make further improvements to education and training provision in the Armed Forces, helping Service personnel to gain recognised qualifications.

Joint Service Co-operation

25. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to increase joint service co-operation in Britain's armed forces. [49601]

Mr. George Robertson: Increasing Joint Service co-operation and integration is a major theme of the Strategic Defence Review. We had already announced the creation of a Joint Services' Command and Staff College at Watchfield. As a result of the Review we will create a pool of Joint Rapid Reaction Forces to include all of our readily available capabilities, bring the Royal Navy and RAF Harriers together in a 'Joint Force 2000' and enhance the role of the Chief of Joint Operations. We will set up a Joint Helicopter Command and new joint arrangements for ground-based air defence and nuclear, chemical and biological defence. We will create a new tri-Service four-star Chief of Defence Logistics and

significantly expand joint integration in the support area. Finally, we will set up a Joint Defence Centre to develop tri-Service doctrine and planning.

Colchester Garrison

26. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the latest estimated value of the private finance initiative for the re-development of Colchester Garrison; when he expects to announce the name of the chosen contractor; and when he expects work to start. [49602]

Mr. Spellar: I have made no estimate of the value to prospective contractors of the private finance initiative for the re-development of Colchester Garrison. Tenders for the PFI project at Colchester were received on 8 July and will now be subject to a full technical and commercial evaluation. The information contained within the tenders is commercial in confidence and is being withheld under section 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. If it is decided that the PFI route represents a viable way forward, a preferred bidder should be announced early next year. I would expect any contract to be awarded in mid-1999 with work starting on a phased basis during the year 2000.

Armed Forces (Commitments)

27. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what change there has been in the level of total commitments falling on the armed forces since 1 May 1997. [49603]

Mr. George Robertson: On 1 May 1997, 24,359 personnel were involved in major operational commitments in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Gulf region and Zaire and in UN deployments in Cyprus, Kuwait and Georgia.

On 1 June 1998, 24,183 personnel were involved in operational commitments. The operation in Zaire had been completed by this date .

Armed Forces (Readiness)

28. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the current level of readiness of the armed forces. [49604]

Dr. Reid: The readiness of the Armed Forces is sufficient to enable them to meet the demanding range of operational tasks they currently undertake. However, some shortfalls have been identified and are being addressed in the Strategic Defence Review.

Airborne Forces

30. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the role of airborne forces. [49606]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the statement my right hon. Friend the Secretary of state for Defence made on 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1073–76, on the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review.

Duke of York's Headquarters

32. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Duke of York's headquarters in Chelsea. [49608]

Dr. Reid: We have announced, following the Strategic Defence Review, that the Duke of York's Headquarters will be sold. Further work is needed on the disposal arrangements. Units currently occupying the site will be re-accommodated as necessary.

Suspected War Criminals (Yugoslavia)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress towards the detention of suspected war criminals in the former Yugoslavia. [49585]

Mr. George Robertson: Nine people indicted for war crimes have been detained in Bosnia by SFOR. Seven of these detentions took place in the British-commanded sector, and involved British SFOR forces, either directly or in support. A further fifteen indictees have surrendered voluntarily to the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague.

Armed Forces (Personnel)

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the impact of the strategic defence review on the personnel strengths of the armed forces. [49599]

Mr. George Robertson: As a result of the Strategic Defence Review, we will increase the size of the Army establishment by 3,300 personnel. Once full manning has been achieved, the net effect of the Review on the Royal Navy's Regular manpower will be a reduction of some 1,400, and the net effect on Regular RAF manpower will be broadly neutral. We intend to achieve full manning in the Royal Air Force by 2000, in the Royal Navy by 2002 and in the Army around 2004.

The Territorial Army will be reduced from around 56,000 to around 40,000 but we will make it more relevant and usable. The Royal Naval Reserve will increase by 350 personnel. No change is planned to the strength of the Royal Marines Reserve. The Reserve Air Forces will increase by 270 posts.

RAF Scampton

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of RAF Scampton following the Strategic Defence Review. [50453]

Dr. Reid: Detailed options for the future use of RAF Scampton are currently being considered taking account of the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review. An announcement on the future of the site will be made as soon as the work is concluded.

Royal Military Police (Army)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the current security classifications of the newsletters produced for the staff of Royal Military Police (Army); how often each newsletter is produced; and when each newsletter was first produced. [51129]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Military Police (Army) have one newsletter the RMP Journal. The Journal, which has no security classification is published three times a year and is received by serving and associated members of the RMP. It was first published in March 1950.

Research and Development (Universities)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many research and development contracts and agreements are currently being funded by his Department in universities; how many of these research projects are classified; and from which of his Department's research establishments these research projects have originated. [51131]

Mr. Spellar: A complete list of all research and development contracts and agreements funded by MOD is not kept. However, in 1997 there were over 450 contracts and agreements, involving about 60 UK academic institutions, for extramural research, funded through the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. Fewer than 25 of the 450 projects are classified.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *569*, if he will list the names of the 11 directorates which currently exist at AWE, Aldermaston. [51134]

Mr. Spellar: The 11 Directorates currently existing at AWE Aldermaston are:

Assurance
Commercial
Communications
Finance
Performance Management
Personal
Physics Research
Programmes
Sites Development
Systems Engineering
Technology.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what volume of sludge containing *(a)* plutonium and *(b)* uranium is presently held at AWE Aldermaston; how this is presently stored; what plans he has to *(a)* reduce the volume held and *(b)* improve storage safety of the material; and if he will make a statement. [51156]

Mr. Spellar: There are at present some 761 cubic metres of sludge stored at AWE Aldermaston. This material contains both plutonium and uranium. It is safely stored in tanks above ground within bunded areas. These tanks are regularly inspected and maintained.

A feasibility study is underway, with the aim of reducing the volume of this material.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what funds have been earmarked in years *(a)* eight, *(b)* nine and *(c)* 10 of his Department's long-term costings for the replacement carriers. [50960]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The Long Term Costings represent projections and assumptions which inform advice to Ministers on the affordability of constituent elements of the Defence Programme. It has been the position of successive Governments that advice to Ministers, and hence LTC information, should not be published. I am therefore withholding this information under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Procurement

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the basis for his Department's assumption that Smart procurement will achieve savings of two per cent. or £2 billion. [50958]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The estimate of Smart procurement cost savings over the next 10 years, amounting to £2 billion, has been compiled in consultation with industry and is based on the progressive application, to a range of existing and planned equipment procurements, of the acquisition reforms announced as part of the Strategic Defence Review. The greatest impact of the reforms will be achieved on procurements which are currently in their early formative stages and therefore most open to change.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how he intends to implement the Treasury's proposal for least cost procurement. [50955]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The term "least cost procurement" is not recognised; the Ministry of Defence pursues a policy of value for money procurement. The Strategic Defence Review included a radical reappraisal of the ways in which we carry out defence procurement. The resulting package of measures, grouped under the banner of "Smart Procurement", aims to make defence procurement faster, cheaper, and better.

Stockholdings

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the means by which industry will meet the stockholding requirements of his Department for weapons, equipment and clothing following the disposal of current stocks. [50964]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* As part of the Strategic Defence Review the Department is assessing the stockholding requirements needed to be retained in house and what may more effectively be provided from industry within agreed readiness times. Each equipment area will be examined in detail and a decision taken on stockholding policy requirement. Following this detailed work the Department will invite expressions of interest from industry.

RAF Chilmark

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to whom, on what terms and in what numbers are buildings available at the former RAF Chilmark for use as a fireworks factory. [51053]

Mr. Spellar: No buildings at the former RAF Chilmark are let or available for use as a fireworks factory. Four buildings have been let on the Ladydown Site on short term leases for fireworks storage and agreement has been reached in principle to let one further building.

Defence Expenditure

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the figures for total defence spending for the years 1996–97 and 1997–98 on an outturn basis and 1998–99 to 2001–02 on an estimated or planned basis *(a)* in cash and *(b)* at 1996–97 prices using the actual and estimated GDP deflator to make the adjustments. [50843]

Mr. George Robertson: The information requested is as follows:

£ million

Year	*Cash*	*1996–97 prices*
1996–97	22,345	22,345
1997–98	21,554	20,987
1998–99	22,240	21,045
1999–2000	22,295	20,562
2000–01	22,830	20,542
2001–02	22,987	20,179

The figure for 1996–97 outturn is that shown in Table 1 (Cash Plans) of "The Government's Expenditure Plans 1998–99 Ministry of Defence" (Cm 3902) which excludes the element of receipts arising from the sale of the married quarters estate that were appropriated onto Defence Votes in that year. The figure for 1997–98 represents the provisional outturn as set out in the Public Expenditure 1997–98 Provisional Outturn White Paper (Cm 3988) adjusted to exclude a further receipt from the sale of the married quarters estate.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to publish detailed Defence Estimates for *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [50842]

Mr. George Robertson: The details of the Government's planned expenditure on defence for the years 1999–2000 to 2001–2002 will be presented to Parliament in the Supply Estimates, in the usual manner, by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury at the start of each financial year; eg, April 1999 for 1999–2000.

Torpedo Testing Facilities

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *261–62*, if he will make a statement on the implications of the Strategic Defence Review for operations at the British Underwater Test Evaluation Centre. [51429]

Mr. Spellar: It is too early to assess what implications the Strategic Defence Review may have for the overall operation of the British Underwater Test and Evaluation Centre. However, with regard to the testing of torpedoes, the answer given to the hon. Member on 25 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *261–62*, still applies.

Surplus Property and Land

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the sites included in his Department's Forward Disposal Programme referred to in part 16 of Supporting Essay II to the Strategic Defence Review; and if he will provide for each such site an estimate of market value. [50950]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *330*.

Bosnia

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the costs of United Kingdom participation in the Bosnia peacekeeping operation for 1998–99 will be charged to the Reserve. [50841]

Mr. George Robertson: As in previous years, it remains open for my Department to make a claim on the Reserve, should it not prove possible for the cost of UK participation in Bosnia peacekeeping operations in 1998–99 to be accommodated within the Defence budget without detriment to the underlying defence programme and the delivery of defence outputs.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to paragraph 151 of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee's Review of the MOD's Radioactive Waste Management and Practice, what action he plans to take in respect of the storage facilities identified as not constructed for long-term use. [51157]

Mr. Spellar: There were two stores at AWE Aldermaston which were identified as not constructed for long-term storage of Intermediate Level Waste (ILW) by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee. The waste from these two stores will be checked, overpacked and transported to one of the existing purpose built stores by the end of 1999. It remains the intention to construct the new ILW store referred to by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee in paragraph 151 of their report on the Ministry of Defence radioactive waste management to deal with future waste arisings.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantity of radioactive liquid has escaped from nuclear submarines held at (i) Rosyth, (ii) Devonport and (iii) Faslane in each year since 1980. [51155]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

C-17 Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the competition for leasing of C-17s indicating the criteria set by his Department. [51502]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 27 April 1998, *Official Report*, column *23*, and to the Strategic Defence Review White Paper, Chapter 5, paragraphs 96 and 147. Requests for Proposals are currently being finalised to meet both the short term strategic airlift requirement announced in the Review and the long term air transport requirement, in parallel

competitions. The lease of aircraft is one of the contract options that could meet the short term requirement. C-17 is not the only contender in either competition.

European Fighter Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the capacity of the European Fighter Aircraft to be used on the new aircraft carriers announced in the Strategic Defence Review. [51438]

Mr. Spellar: A 'navalised' Eurofighter is one of the possible solutions currently under consideration to meet the Future Carrier Borne Aircraft requirement.

Ordnance Manufacturing

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the ordnance manufacturing capability of the UK for the supply of UK armed forces requirement. [51500]

Mr. Spellar: UK industry has extensive capability for the development and production of the guns and ammunition required by the Armed Forces. Most requirements are now subject to international competition. However, the principal recent orders for guns, including the AS90 howitzer, the gun for the Challenger 2 tank and the SA 80 small arm, have been awarded to UK industry. UK industry also continues to supply the great majority of the Armed Forces' ammunition needs.

Joint Services Command and Staff College

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been spent on providing temporary accommodation for the Joint Services Command and Staff College at Bradwell. [51297]

Mr. George Robertson: The decision to accommodate the Joint Services Command and Staff College temporarily at Bracknell (not Bradwell) was taken by the previous Government. The accommodation at Bracknell consists of existing buildings previously used by the former RAF Staff College, supplemented by temporary accommodation units. The total spend on providing the temporary accommodation is now estimated to be some £8.9 million, which compares favourably with the original estimate of £10.2 million. This figure includes the provision and maintenance of the temporary units until 2000, the provision of IT and relocation costs.

Bilderberg Meeting, Turnbern

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his attendance at the Bilderberg Conference in Ayrshire on 14 and 15 May. [49581]

Mr. George Robertson: I attended part of the Bilderberg Conference in Ayrshire last May to contribute to one of the discussions relevant to my Ministerial responsibilities.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 21 July 1998

HOME DEPARTMENT

UK Passport Agency

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how the UK Passport Agency performed against its targets in 1997–98; and what performance targets he has set for the Agency in 1998–99. [52006]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK Passport Agency performed very well in 1997–98. With demand 28 per cent. above forecast, it did not meet its target for processing properly completed straightforward applications within a maximum of ten working days. But customers' travel needs were met on most occasions, and customer satisfaction remained very high.

The UK Passport Agency's financial target was to secure efficiency savings of 11.1 per cent. in the three year period 1995–96 to 1997–98 equivalent to £11.32 per passport service provided. The latest indications are that the Agency has achieved a unit cost of £9.90, which represents an efficiency saving of 10.3 per cent. for the year, and nearly 25 per cent. for the three year period.

1998–99 will be a transitional and difficult year for the Agency, as it manages the introduction of new passport issuing arrangements and a more secure British passport from October 1998. Nevertheless, I expect the Agency to maintain a high standard of service throughout the year.

I have set the Agency the following targets which take account of the special circumstances that apply in 1998–99, and the cost of the new arrangements:

To process properly completed straightforward applications within a maximum of 15 working days in April, and 10 working days for the remainder of the year.

In seeking to meet this target, the Agency will give priority to customers' travel needs, aiming to meet declared travel dates for at least 99.99 per cent. of passports issued.

To achieve an accrued unit cost of £12 per passport service provided.

The Chief Executive will remain directly accountable to me for the performance of the UK Passport Agency. An Advisory Board, including two private sector members with experience of delivering services to the public, will continue to provide me with an independent assessment of the Agency's performance.

Fire Service

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what steps are currently being taken by the Fire Service to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of virtual reality computer simulation in operational command training; [50761]

(2) what steps his Department will take on the forthcoming report of the Chief Fire Officer and others on the nationwide trial of virtual reality computer simulation training. [50758]

Mr. George Howarth: The contribution that multi-media systems can make to the training and assessment of fire officers in the knowledge and skills they require to be competent in their professional role, particularly in the area of operational command, is recognised.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services is already pursuing work with the fire service to develop the concept and principles of operational command appropriate for fire service officers. This includes an on-going examination of computer simulation systems which could support necessary training, and of reports of trials that are undertaken.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum seekers in the United Kingdom are currently held in detention; [50832]

(2) how many asylum seekers currently detained in the United Kingdom have been detained for *(a)* between one month and three months, *(b)* between three months and six months, *(c)* between six months and one year and *(d)* over one year. [50825]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As at 30 June 1998, a total of 775 persons who had sought asylum at some stage were detained solely under Immigration Act powers. A breakdown showing the duration of time those persons had been continuously detained is given in the table.

Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 30 June 1998, who had sought asylum at some stage, by length of detention[3] and immigration status

Length	*Port*	*Illegal entrants*	*Subject to deportation action*	*Total*
0–1 month[2]	71	183	3	257
1–3 months	85	149	6	240
3–6 months	54	92	7	153
6–12 months	49	42	13	104
Over 12 months	3	12	6	21
Total	262	478	35	775

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971.

[2] These figures are approximate because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period.

[3] Length of detention relates only to the current continuous period of detention.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers of 28 April 1998, *Official Report*, column 96 and 7 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *452*, when he expects the casework programme system to be used to deal with asylum casework. [50974]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Officials are in discussion with Siemens Business Services about the date on which the new Information Technology system will be introduced. With effect from 17 August, some cases will be dealt with

under new integrated caseworking procedures by a pilot group using currently available Information Technology support.

Motoring Offences

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many motorists were *(a)* prosecuted for and *(b)* convicted for offences relating to the illegal use of bus lanes in the last year for which figures are available; and what were the figures for 1990. [51087]

Mr. Michael: Prosecutions and convictions for this offence cannot be distinguished from other offences connected with neglect of traffic directions in the statistics collected centrally.

The Government are supporting the Traffic Director for London in developing a system whereby bus lane offences can be detected by camera.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drivers have been *(a)* stopped for and *(b)* convicted of offences arising from excessive exhaust emissions in (i) the Metropolitan Police area and (ii) England and Wales in the last year for which figures are available. [51079]

Mr. Michael: Information obtained from the Vehicle Inspectorate (an executive agency of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) shows that 111,865 vehicles were stopped for a specific excess exhaust emission check by the Inspectorate in England and Wales in the year 1996–97. 6,450 of these were in the Greater London area.

There were 94 proceedings for this offence in England and Wales in 1996, of which 65 resulted in convictions. 17 of these proceedings and 11 of the convictions were in the Metropolitan Police area.

Most offences of this nature encountered by the Vehicle Inspectorate are dealt with by the issue of a prohibition notice and 5,733 such notices were issued in England and Wales in 1996–97, 420 of them in the Greater London area.

Under the Environment Act 1995, local authorities now have the power to conduct checks for excess exhaust emissions, and in trials taking place in seven local authority areas, figures provided by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions show that nearly 8,000 vehicles have been tested so far in 1998, resulting in 450 fixed penalty notices being issued.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the experimental schemes involving video cameras placed in buses to film those illegally using bus lanes; in which areas they are located; and if he will make a statement. [51086]

Mr. Michael: Following a pilot project in 1995, an on-board camera system for enforcing bus lane offences was "type approved" in December 1997, after being fully tested against a published specification as required by the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988. It provides visual evidence of an offence with the exact time and location.

The initial Area Scheme is managed by the Traffic Director for London, in partnership with the Metropolitan Police, in an area broadly bounded by the A1, A10, A406 and A501, with 61 bus lanes within the boroughs of Islington, Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Enfield and the City of Westminster. Boundary and repeater signs inform drivers. The Area Scheme has proved successful and the Traffic Director for London is currently working up a programme for London-wide implementation.

CS Gas

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many times CS gas has been used by police forces; in how many cases medical attention was required; and how many incidents led to police disciplinary measures. [51083]

Mr. Michael: As the use of CS spray is an operational matter for chief officers, information is not kept centrally about how many times it has been used.

During police trials of CS spray between 1 March and 31 August 1996, in which 3,818 officers carried CS canisters in 16 forces, CS was discharged 726 times. Everyone sprayed with CS, and most of the officers affected by cross-contamination, were seen by a police surgeon, resulting in 585 medical reports being submitted to the trial evaluators. These showed that further treatment was advised for a total of 14 civilians and three officers. The advice ranged from "to attend eye hospital (since previously partially sighted in left eye)" to "should wash face and eye area later". One person was taken directly to hospital and five more treated by a hospital in due course. The data from the trials showed that the risk of injury from CS was less than that from baton use.

Police Complaints Authority figures show that, in the twelve months up to 31 March 1998, one case involving police use of CS resulted in a disciplinary charge, and a further ten in other disciplinary action.

Treaty of Canterbury

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the provisions in the Treaty of Canterbury that prevent the application of the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987. [51153]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are no provisions in the Treaty of Canterbury which prevent the application of the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act 1987.

Tote

Mr. Cunliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many expressions of interest he has received from prospective buyers of the Tote. [51018]

Mr. George Howarth: The Home Office has received three expressions of interest. However, no decision has yet been taken to sell the Tote. We have launched a review which will consider a range of options for the Tote's future.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Ambulance Service

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps her Department has taken to improve the ambulance fleet in Northern Ireland; and when the decisions on these steps were taken. [50327]

Mr. Worthington: Due to historical under-investment, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service inherited an aging fleet on its creation as an HSS Trust in 1995. In recognition of the particular problems faced by the ambulance service; the Trust was given approval on 3 September 1997 to draw on £200,000 of its 1998–99 capital allocation to address pressures on the ambulance fleet. Capital provision of £1.5 million was announced on 9 February 1998 for the urgent replacement of accident and emergency vehicles. This was in addition to the general capital provision of £500,000 approved for the 1998–99 year. As a result of this additional funding, significant improvements in the standard of ambulance services and patient care throughout the Province will be achieved. The position will be further enhanced by the PFI exercise being undertaken by the Trust to support the replacement of the remaining out of standard ambulances. This will mean the Trust moving from one of the oldest to one of the most modern emergency fleets in the UK.

In recognition of the changing profile of ambulance services throughout Northern Ireland, a wide ranging review of the service will shortly be undertaken.

Cancer Treatment

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for future cancer treatment at the Belfast City Hospital. [50134]

Mr. Worthington: The Belfast City Hospital, working closely with the Royal Group of Hospitals, is to be developed as the regional cancer centre for Northern Ireland; the centre will also act as a cancer unit for the local population. A Cancer Services Steering Group has been established at the Belfast City Hospital to oversee the development of cancer services, including the smooth transfer of radiotherapy and chemotherapy services from Belvoir Park Hospital to a new building on the Belfast City Hospital site. It is expected that the centre will be operational by the year 2003.

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for the provision of lung and oesophageal cancer services at the Royal Victoria Hospital. [50132]

Mr. Worthington: The Royal Victoria Hospital currently provides a regional thoracic surgery service for patients with lung and oesophageal cancers. The Cancer Working Group Sub Group on Lung Cancer recommended that purchasers should make arrangements for the appointment of a third thoracic surgery consultant at the Royal Victoria Hospital and assess the need for the future appointment of a fourth consultant. The Royal Group of Hospitals and Dental Hospitals HSS Trust is currently advertising for a third thoracic surgeon. The need for a fourth thoracic surgeon will be kept under review in light of anticipated increases in the lung and oesophageal cancer workload.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what target her Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49886]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the e-mail address of her Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit. [49888]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments do not have a central Ministerial Correspondence Unit. Each Minister's Private Office handles its own correspondence. Ministers may be accessed at press.nio@nics.gov.uk.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the cost in a full financial year of Irish translation facilities in the new Northern Ireland Assembly. [50193]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The question of Irish translation facilities is a matter initially for the Assembly to determine. Should it decide that such facilities are required, the cost will depend on a number of factors related to the extent and type of service or services required. It is therefore not possible to provide any meaningful estimate at this stage.

Housing (Relocation Requests)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications have been received by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the current year for relocation due to intimidation; and what were the figures for each of the previous five years. [51078]

Mr. Paul Murphy: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose Chief Executive has advised me that the position is as follows:

Year/date	*Number*
1993–94	324
1994–95	307
1995–96	256
1996–97	394
1997–98	374
1 April 1998 to 30 June 1998	54
6 July 1998 to 15 July 1998[1]	117

[1] Post Drumcree

Prisoners

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people are currently held in gaol in Northern Ireland; how many are remand prisoners; and how many of each are held for scheduled offences. [51080]

Marjorie Mowlam: On 17 July 1998 there were 1,368 persons held in Northern Ireland prisons and 198 inmates in Young Offenders Centres. Of the total, 359 were on remand, 103 being held for scheduled offences.

Abortion

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what proposals she has for the Northern Ireland Assembly to exercise powers, functions and rights of debate as regards policy on abortion in Northern Ireland; what powers, functions and rights of debate on policy will be reserved for the United Kingdom Parliament; and if she will make a statement; [51565]

(2) what proposals she has to devolve policy as regards the application of the Abortion Act 1967 to the Northern Ireland Assembly; [51566]

(3) what proposals she has to devolve policy on abortion from the United Kingdom Parliament to the Northern Ireland Assembly; and if she will make a statement. [51567]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In Northern Ireland the law on abortion is currently classified as part of the criminal law and is therefore a "reserved" matter. This means that it can be legislated upon either at Westminster or, with the approval of the Secretary of State and Parliament, by the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Attorney-General what representations he has received on the regional reorganisation of the Crown Prosecution Service. [50757]

The Attorney-General: Shortly after this Government were elected, I announced that the Crown Prosecution Service would be reorganised into 42 Areas, establishing a one-to-one relationship between CPS Areas and police areas (save in London where there will be a single CPS Area covering both the Metropolitan Police Service and the City of London Police).

On 1 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 42–45, I published the report of the independent review of the Crown Prosecution Service, set up by this Government under the chairmanship of Sir Iain Glidewell. That report endorses the move to 42 CPS Areas.

Responses received so far to the Glidewell report have welcomed the move to 42 CPS Areas.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today placed in the Library of the House a paper agreed between himself, the Lord Chancellor and myself. The paper outlines the Government's wider intention, as part of the process of modernising the administration of justice, to align the geographical boundaries of the various criminal justice agencies. The move to 42 CPS Areas is part of that re-alignment of boundaries. It will enable the Crown Prosecution Service and other criminal justice agencies to communicate and work together more effectively.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

"The Multi-Media Revolution"

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the Government response to the Fourth report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee "The Multi-Media Revolution" (HC 520-I). [51924]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have today, in conjunction with my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade, published the Government response to the report "The Multi-Media Revolution" (Command Paper number 4020). We have also jointly published today a Green Paper "Regulating Communications: Approaching Convergence in the Information Age" (Command Paper number 4022).

New Opportunities Fund

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will consult the Board of the New Opportunities Fund on the policy directions which he proposes to issue to them; and if he will make a statement. [51922]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have written to the Fund's Chairman with drafts of Directions I propose to make under my powers in section 26(1) and 43C(1) of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. I have placed copies of the letter and drafts in the Libraries of the House.

Tourism

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *344*, on Millennium tourism, how many of the new millennium attractions, which are to appear in The New Map of Britain, are outside London; and if he will list those in the North West. [51184]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* As I said in my reply of 6 July, the British Tourist Authority is now developing plans specifically to promote the Millennium celebrations. One of its proposals has the working title "the New Map of Britain", a shorthand description for a promotional document listing attractions open between 1999 and 2001. The list will include many projects including some funded by the Millennium Commission and other Lottery distributors. It will be at least 6 months before this list can be drawn up.

I can, however, assure my hon. Friend that the list will contain a good regional spread of attractions, and that the North West will be well represented.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many new jobs he estimates will be created in the tourism sector over the next five years. [51032]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Tourism employment grew by 16 per cent. in the ten years to December 1997 and 1.7 million people (approximately 7 per cent. of the total of employees) are working in the tourism industry in Britain. Against that background, the World Travel and Tourism Council's prediction of 300,000 new jobs in tourism in the UK in the next decade.

we are confident that the tourism strategy we shall publish later this year will help the industry maximise its undoubted potential for employment generation.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future of the English Tourist Board. [51033]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* We will be announcing to Parliament on 24 July proposals for revising the structure and mechanisms through which Government support for all DCMS sectors is channelled. This will include domestic tourism in England.

CABINET OFFICE

Lobbyists

Mr. Spring: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what criteria he uses to determine which lobbying firms should receive *(a)* solicited and *(b)* unsolicited information from his Department. [50735]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* All contacts with outside interest groups are conducted in accordance with the principles set out in the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Code.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Open Government White Paper

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, pursuant to section 9.21 of the White Paper on Open Government, on what basis he stated census returns contain an explicit assurance that records will not be released for 100 years. [50831]

Dr. David Clark: Confidentiality of the information in decennial census returns is governed by sanctions against unlawful disclosure in successive Census Acts and provisions in the Public Records Acts as to custody, closure to public inspection and access to the records. However, as well as observing the legal constraints on disclosure, regard is also paid to the assurances of confidentiality given at the time the information was collected from the public. For example, the 1991 census form stated that

"The forms will be kept securely within my—the Registrar General's—Office and treated as confidential for 100 years".

I presume it is to these assurances of confidentiality that the previous Government were referring in the 1993 White Paper to which the hon. Member refers.

Departmental Accounts

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when the accounts for the Duchy of Lancaster will be placed in the Libraries of the House. [51921]

Dr. David Clark: I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that the accounts of the Duchy of Lancaster for the year ending 31 March 1998 were laid before the House today.

Performance Targets

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what performance targets he has approved for the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency, the Central Office of Information and the Civil Service College for 1998–99. [51920]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have approved the following key performance targets for my executive agencies for 1998–99:

Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency

1. to break even on an accruals basis;
2. to deliver CCTA services within voted provisions;
3. to achieve 75 per cent. of customers surveyed confirming that CCTA has operated within the terms of its Charter;
4. to secure a 5 per cent. reduction in the cost of support services;
5. to secure customer satisfaction at levels 1 and 2 (out of 5) on 85 per cent. of assignments and services delivered.

Central Office of Information

1. to achieve a financial surplus of £1 million on an accruals basis;
2. to achieve efficiency improvements of a unit cost reduction of 2 per cent.
3. to achieve a customer satisfaction index of 8.25 (out of 10)

Civil Service College

1. to break even on an accruals basis;
2. to achieve £900,000 of consultancy income;
3. to attract 1,500 students from the Senior Civil Service;
4. to attract 900 students from the private sector;
5. to earn 88 per cent. of student course evaluations in the highest two categories (on a 6 point scale).

Freedom of Information

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when the Government intend to publish their response to the Third report of the Select Committee on Public Administration's report on the Government's proposals for a Freedom of Information Act (HC 398). [52033]

Dr. David Clark: I have today written to my hon. Friend enclosing a Memorandum which sets out the Government's response to this report. I am placing copies of my letter and of the Memorandum in the Libraries of the House. The Committee's inquiry into Freedom of Information has resulted in a constructive and well-thought through report. I am pleased to be able to respond both promptly and generally positively to the Committee, and look forward to working with the Committee when a draft Freedom of Information Bill is published, which we aim to do by the end of September.

Task Forces

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the taskforces and other groups composed of independent members which have been set up by the Government since 1 May 1997, with in each case *(a)* their remit, *(b)* their membership, *(c)* how many members are (i) scientists and (ii) engineers, *(d)* any remuneration members receive for their services and *(e)* their budgets. [49975]

Dr. David Clark: The information requested on the remit of individual task forces, and details of their membership and budgets is not held centrally. The details for the task forces and advisory groups supported by the Office of Public Services are set out below.

1. *Better Regulation Task Force*

(a) 'To advise government on action which improves the effectiveness and quality of government regulation by ensuring that it is necessary fair, and affordable, and simple to understand and administer, taking account of the needs of small businesses and ordinary people'.

(b) 16 independent members as follows:

Christopher Haskins (Chair): Chairman, Northern Foods plc.

Teresa Graham (Deputy): Partner, Baker Tilly

Stephen Alambritis: Federation of Small Businesses

Sarah Anderson: Director, Mayday Staff Services

Allan Charlesworth: Assistant Chief Constable, West Yorkshire Police

Hugh Field: BCB International; Chair, Local Business Partnership

Ram Gidoomal: Winning Communications

Sir Simon Gourlay: Farmer; President of National Farmers Union 1986–91

Pamela Meadows: Economist; formerly Director, Policy Studies Institute

Robert Purry: Head of tax, Grant Thornton

Chai Patel: Chai Patel Associates; Continuing Care Conference

Janet Russell: Environmental Services Manager, Kirklees Council

Peter Salsbury: Managing Director, Marks & Spencer

Helena Shovelton: Chair, National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux

Sue Slipman: Director, Gas Consumers Council

Ed Sweeney: General Secretary, Banking Insurance and Finance Union

(c) This information was not requested on appointment.

(d) Members are unpaid (reasonable expenses only are paid).

(e) Costs are met from within existing divisional resources.

2. *People's Panel Advisory Group*

(a) 'To advise the Service First Unit (Office of Public Service) on issues relating to the use and development of the People's Panel'.

(b) Six members, with the following independent:

Professor Julia Brannen: Thomas Coram Research Institute, University of London

Professor Sara Arber: Department of Sociology, University of Surrey

Nicola Simpson: Director of Policy and Public Affairs, National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux

Michelle Heyworth: Market Research Manager, British Airways

Mike Bartram: Senior Policy Development Officer, National Consumer Council

(c) There are no engineers or scientists in the Group.

(d) Members are unpaid (travel expenses are reimbursed).

(e) No specific budget for the Advisory Group.

3. *Charter Mark Judging Panel*

(a) 'To provide an independent assessment of Charter Mark applications and, following advice from Charter Mark assessors and relevant inspectorates, regulatory bodies and government departments, decide on the award of Charter Marks'.

(b) 10 independent members as follows:

Baroness Perry (Chair): President, Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge and a member of the National Advisory Council on Education

Rodney Bickerstaffe: General Secretary, UNISON

Anne Galbraith: former Chairman of the Royal Victoria Infirmary NHS Trust, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Angela Heylin OBE: Chairman of Charles Barker plc.

Peter Housden: Chief Executive of Nottinghamshire County Council

Neil Johnson OBE FIMI DL: Chief Executive Officer and General Secretary of the Royal Automobile club

Stephen Locke: Director of Research and Knowledge Management at Andersen Consulting

James Palumbo: Chairman of the Ministry of Sound

Baroness Wilcox: former Chairman of the National Consumer Council

Pat Killen: former Chairman of the Northern Ireland Citizen's Charter and Advisory Panel.

(c) This information was not requested on appointment.

(d) Members are unpaid (travel and subsistence expenses are reimbursed).

(e) No specific budget for the Panel.

4. *Interchange Steering Council*

(a) "To provide strategic direction for the interchange initiative; to act as a champion for interchange wherever possible; to review progress both by departments and other sectors in taking forward the initiative, and provide relevant advice; to consider the best ways in which the initiative can be publicised; to communicate the views of the sectors represented by the membership; and to advise on the dissemination of information about Interchange;

(b) 12 members, with the following independent:

Sir Colin Marshall: (Joint Chairman) President of the CBI

John Sacher CBE: Chairman of Trustees WIG and IPT Trustee

Sir Alan Langlands: Chief Executive, National Health Service Executive

Diana Warwick: Chief Executive, Committee of vice-Chancellors and Principals

Brian Briscoe: Chief Executive, Local Government Association

Chris Haskins: Chairman, Northern Foods plc

Stuart Etherington: Chief Executive, NCVO

Peter Sinclair: Chief Executive, Business Links Network Company

(c) This information was not requested on appointment.

(d) Members are unpaid.

(e) Costs are met from within existing divisional resources.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49234]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* *(a)* This answer covers the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Office and Office of Public Service (including

its Agencies), but excludes vehicles from the Government Car and Despatch Agency, for which I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson to reply to the hon. Member direct.

Engine cubic capacity	Fuel type: Petrol unleaded	Diesel	Owned	Leased
1600	8	0	0	8
1700	0	29	0	29
1800	12	10	0	22
2000	1	0	0	1
2500	0	4	0	4
7000	0	1	0	1
Total	21	44	0	65

Additionally, the Civil Service College at Sunningdale own and operate one Electricar vehicle on site, which is not due for replacement before 2001.

Of the 65 leased vehicles, 17 fall due for replacement in 1998–99 while 44 of the remaining 48 vehicles become due for replacement in 1999–2000. The replacement of the remaining 4 vehicles will depend on the success, or otherwise, of a PFI exercise currently under way.

(b) Nil.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 21 July 1998:

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, has asked me in my capacity as Chief Executive of the Government Car and Despatch Agency to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the number of vehicles owned and leased by this Agency, and the Agency's vehicle replacement programme.

This Agency operates two separate businesses. The Government Car Service provides long and short term chauffeur and car hire to Ministers and senior officials. The InterDespatch Service provides secure mail services within government and the wider public sector. Each service has its own fleet of vehicles and the figures below cover both of these. Not all the Agency's vehicles will be replaced during the three years in question.

The information you requested is set out in the following table.

Engine cc	Fuel type	Owned	Leased	Replacement programme: 1998–99	1999–00	2000–01
1600	Petrol	16	—	4	1	4
2000	Petrol	77	—	23	12	31
2500	Petrol	19	—	2	4	11
2700	Petrol	33	—	11	1	—
2900	Petrol	1	—	1	—	—
3500	Petrol	3	—	—	—	1
4000	Petrol	5	—	2	—	—
4200	Petrol	1	—	—	—	—
2000	Petrol/Gas	4	—	—	—	4
2300	Petrol/Gas	1	—	—	1	—
2700	Petrol/Gas	1	—	—	—	—
4000	Petrol/Gas	1	—	—	—	1
2500	Diesel	59	—	19	19	19
2900	Diesel	—	1	—	1	—
4500	Diesel	1	—	—	—	—
Total		222	1	62	39	71

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Commonhold

38. **Mrs. Lait:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many representations he has received on the introduction of commonhold tenure of property; and if he will make a statement. [49911]

Mr. Hoon: Since 1 May 1997, I have received seven letters from Members of this House making representations about commonhold, and there have been three Parliamentary Questions, including the present one. Over the same period, it is estimated that my Department has received, on average, about one letter and three telephone inquiries on the subject of commonhold per week, although a number of these were repeat inquiries from the same people. Those making inquiries included individuals living in leasehold accommodation, residents associations, representatives of mortgage lenders, and others.

Legal Aid

39. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to extend support under the green form scheme to additional law centres. [49912]

Mr. Hoon: For the moment, there are no specific proposals to extend support under the green form scheme to additional law centres. However, in June 1997, the Lord Chancellor issued a direction under Section 4 of the Legal Aid Act 1988 giving the Legal Aid Board the power to extend its pilot for the provision of legal advice and assistance by not-for-profit advice agencies, under the green form scheme, to allow the funding of salaried lawyers at law centres. The green form scheme will be replaced with fixed price contracts by the end of 1999. It will be open to law centres, along with other suppliers of legal services, to seek contracts.

Disabled Access

40. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to make his Department more accessible to the general public. [49913]

Mr. Hoon: It is the Lord Chancellor's policy that all new court buildings and existing buildings undergoing significant alteration or extension should enable disabled people, staff and court users alike, to gain independent access into and within the building.

Magistrates courts are locally managed by magistrates courts committees under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. Decisions concerning the future and number of magistrates courts in their area are for the relevant MCC to determine in accordance with section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. While my Department has no role in the actual decision making process, we may have a limited role if a magistrates courts committee decides to make a bid for a new building via the Private Finance Initiative.

My Department has also directed that all magistrates courts committees should meet specified standards of performance relating to disabled court users. To assist courts committees in implementing the standards, a booklet containing guidance and useful contacts accompanied the direction. Copies of the guidance can be found in the House of Commons Library.

The Court Service Agency is responsible for all civil and the higher criminal courts. It keeps court accommodation under constant review.

To comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), the Court Service is reviewing its practices, policies and procedures. A number of initiatives are under way: Customer Service Officers will have disability awareness training, covering the DDA and all staff will receive printed guidance; interpreters for deaf court users are provided and paid for in criminal, civil and family cases; the tribunals for which the Lord Chancellor has responsibility are considering a similar scheme; a leaflet is being prepared advising court users about available facilities for people with different needs, for example, information about the Court Service will be made available on audio cassette and is available in Braille, as are a series of leaflets about small claims in seven minority languages: Arabic, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu, Chinese and Bengali.

Fines

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list for each court in Derbyshire, for the last year for which figures are available, how many *(a)* attachment of earnings orders were issued to collect (i) fines and (ii) reparation orders and *(b)* orders were made by each court to deduct fines and other money from social security payments. [51093]

Mr. Hoon: These figures are not collected centrally, and a full answer could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. I have been informed by the Justices' Chief Executive for Derbyshire that currently in the Chesterfield PSD, 54 attachment of earnings orders and 50 orders for deduction from social security payments are in existence, and in the Buxton PSD there are 11 and 6 respectively. I have not been given a breakdown between fines and reparation orders. I have been further informed that it is difficult to extract the number of orders where full payment has been made and the file is now closed.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list for each magistrates' court in Derbyshire for the last year for which figures are available *(a)* the total amount of fines imposed, *(b)* the percentage of that money collected, *(c)* the amount of fines written off as uncollectable and *(d)* the criteria used for writing that money off. [51094]

Mr. Hoon: Figures for *(a)* and *(c)* are shown in the table, together with explanations. The table also shows the amount collected in the same period. The percentage figure *(b)* has not been calculated because the amounts collected do not relate directly to the amounts imposed. Write off *(d)* is authorised only when all realistic steps to enforce sums due have been taken without success, and the circumstances fall within one of those listed in the note to the table.

April 1997-March 1998

£

	(a) Fines imposed	*(b)* Amount collected	*(c)* Written off
Chesterfield	2,114,436	1,882,373	155,780
Derby and South Derbyshire	2,109,029	1,738,910	425,398
East Derbyshire	1,201,207	548,292	678,794
Grand total for Derbyshire MCC	5,424,672	4,169,575	1,259,972

Notes:

(a) Fines imposed includes fines, costs, compensation awards and contributions to Legal Aid

Also included are fines etc. imposed at other courts which have been transferred to this court for enforcement. Fines etc. imposed locally but transferred out to other courts for enforcement have been excluded

(b) Amount collected includes payments against amounts imposed in previous years as well as the current year, and amounts remitted by the courts, but exclude amounts written off

(c) Amounts Written Off may have been imposed in previous years as well as the current year

(d) Criteria for write off

The defendant's/defaulter's whereabouts are unknown and cannot be traced

The defendant/defaulter is known to have emigrated or gone abroad and there is very little real prospect of return or recovery of the sum

The defendant/defaulter has died. However if a fine was involved and the fine itself was particularly high, the justices clerk may wish to consider whether the estate has benefited from the crime. Only if it is clear that it has, should consideration be given to lodging a claim against the estate and any subsequent request to write off should show this has been done and the outcome of the action

The defendant has been sent to a mental health institution for a period of 12 months or more

The court has despatched a notice to a defendant who was not present in court informing him in error of a lesser fine, contribution to costs order that the court imposed—in such cases the balance would be considered for write-off

The sum outstanding is less than £5 and is considered to be not worth pursuing

As a result of subsequent proceedings the defendant is sentenced to imprisonment for a period of 12 months or more

The sum was imposed or awarded against a limited company which has subsequently been wound up or, where there are no goods on which to levy distress, the company has ceased trading and it is not considered financially worthwhile for the court to initiate

A serviceman has been sentenced to a period of military corrective training

The defendant has moved permanently to Scotland

Other, where circumstances for write off are not covered by any of the above criteria, and grounds for write off are provided in a separate note

Source:

Magistrates' Courts Management Information System 1997–98.

County Courts (Disabled Facilities)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of county courts in Derbyshire provide *(a)* wheelchair access, *(b)* disabled toilet facilities and *(c)* facilities for persons with seeing and hearing disabilities. [51089]

Mr. Hoon: There are three county courts in Derbyshire: Derby (at the Combined Court Centre), Chesterfield and Buxton.

At Derby there is a lift and wheelchair access by the front door of the court. A wheelchair is also available and there are toilets for the disabled. There are no special facilities for the hard of hearing and those with seeing disabilities.

At Chesterfield, there is a ramp into the court building, a lift and toilets for the disabled. There are no special facilities for the hard of hearing and those with seeing disabilities.

At Buxton, there is no wheelchair access. The court is situated above a shop and there is no lift. However, there is a door bell at street level by the entrance of the court so that users can summon assistance. There are no special facilities for the hard of hearing and those with seeing disabilities.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Education (Third-world Countries)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department takes to help provide education facilities within the United Kingdom for young people from third world countries. [50903]

Mr. Foulkes: One of my Department's key objectives is to improve quality of, and access to, education within developing countries.

My Department provides funding for about 3,500 scholars each year from developing countries to study at universities and other Higher Education Institutes, at a cost of £23 million in 1998–99.

In addition, DFID supports a small programme of school exchanges through Education Partners Overseas, at an annual cost of £50K. This involves developing country children coming to this country for a short period.

Within the UK, it is the responsibility of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to ensure that there are sufficient suitable school places within their areas for all resident children, this includes those from other countries, and those with refugee status.

Child Labour

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the Governments with whom she has discussed the use of child labour in their countries during the last 12 months. [51243]

Mr. Foulkes: In the course of her participation in the Oslo Conference on child labour in November 1997 and the Forum for the Global March Against Child Labour in Geneva last month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State addressed representatives of the governments of many of the developing countries where child labour is a serious problem. Our officials are discussing with a number of them ways in which we can work together to help eradicate child labour. Currently our work on these issues involves the following countries:

India
Pakistan
Bangladesh
Nepal
Thailand
Cambodia
Laos
Vietnam
China
Kenya
South Africa
Tanzania
Zambia.

PRIME MINISTER

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1071–72, what factors will be taken into account in deciding whether a freedom of information Bill will be included in the Queen's Speech. [50420]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Already this session, 32 Bills delivering our manifesto commitments have received Royal Assent. We will continue to put the Government's priorities forward in the next session.

Ministry for Rural Development

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Prime Minister when he plans to announce his response to proposals to create a new Ministry for Rural Development. [50572]

The Prime Minister: No decision has yet been reached.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Prime Minister how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50678]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Gibraltar

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to discuss the issue of Gibraltar during his forthcoming meeting with Spain's Socialist Party Leader. [51304]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* This was an introductory meeting with the new leader of the Socialist Party in Spain which was arranged on a party-to-party basis. Therefore, I did not discuss Gibraltar with Mr. Borrell.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister how many reports the Social Exclusion Unit has produced to date; and what areas they are currently examining. [51311]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* In the first phase of its work, the Social Exclusion Unit has produced two reports "Social Exclusion and Truancy" and "Rough Sleeping" and the Unit is now involved in following them up. Copies of the reports are available in the libraries of the House.

The Unit's third priority for its first phase was

"developing integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates"

and a report on this work will be published shortly.

The Unit was also asked to focus on

"improving mechanisms for integrating the work of departments, local authorities and other agencies at national level and on the ground"

and as part of the follow up work on school exclusion and truancy is looking at the overlap between the number of plans affecting young children; joint audit and inspection of different services bearing on the same client; and the need for better information sharing between professionals.

The Unit is also involved in drawing up key indicators of social exclusion and is pursuing this in parallel with the Department of Social Security's consultation on the success measures proposed in the Green Paper on Welfare Reform. A decision on the second phase work of the Unit will be announced in due course.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the members of the Social Exclusion Unit, indicating the special responsibilities and experience of each member. [51310]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The table shows the members of the Social Exclusion Unit at senior executive level and above. The unit works in teams on its projects, details of which were set out in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) on 8 December 1997, *Official Report*, columns *408–10*. Its next set of priorities will be announced shortly.

Unit member	*Department/organisation*
Moira Wallace (Head of Unit)	HM Treasury
Jon Bright (Deputy Head of Unit)	Crime Concern
Simon Courage	Department for Education and Employment
Mandy Jacklin	Department of Social Security
Geoff Mulgan	No. 10 Policy Unit
Zena Peatfield	Assistant Director of Social Services, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
David Reardon	Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Inner London Probation Service
Liz Walton	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Louise Dominian	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Guy Gardener	Chief Superintendent, Kent County Constabulary
Amanda Jordon	NatWest, Senior Executive
Angela Sarkis	Church Urban Fund

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the work of the Social Exclusion Unit on the provision of furnished accommodation. [51447]

The Prime Minister: The Social Exclusion Unit has no specific remit to look at the provision of furnished accommodation. The Social Exclusion Unit has, however, recently published a report on rough sleeping. A copy is available in the libraries of the House.

"Newsnight"

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what was the basis for the statement made on his behalf by his Chief Press Officer concerning ministerial responses to invitations to appear on "Newsnight". [51814]

The Prime Minister: The Government seek to field Ministers for interviews as requested by the broadcast media, and my Chief Press Secretary has a role in the co-ordination of this activity. Given the growth in outlets, and the number of bids received, judgments inevitably have to be applied about which interviews Ministers agree to. Ministers regularly appear on Newsnight and many other BBC programmes.

House of Lords

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister what estimate he has made of the likely timescale for the reform of the House of Lords. [51446]

The Prime Minister: The Government will publish their proposals on reform of the House of Lords in due course.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Air Carrier Liability

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which other European Union member states have introduced, or are planning to introduce, measures similar to the Air Carrier Liability Order 1998. [50820]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The United Kingdom is not notified of the actions of other EU Member States in relation to the implementation of Community law. However, I understand the Commission is considering

writing to Member States to ask what steps they have taken, or plan to take, to implement Council Regulation 2027/97, which enters into force on 17 October 1998.

Roads

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates his Department has made of the costs of maintaining the UK's national and local road network in the next five years: and what research his Department has evaluated into the value for money achieved by the current maintenance programme. [50883]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Future resources for maintenance of both the trunk and local road networks are being determined in the light of the Chancellor's announcements of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–94, on resources for transport and local government current spending (which includes maintenance of non-principal roads). We shall announce figures in due course.

The Highways Agency provides advice on the value for money of maintenance activities in several documents, such as the design Manual for Roads and Bridges, the Trunk Road Maintenance Manual and the Value for Money Manual. The advice in these documents is based, among other things, on research carried out by the Agency. The Agency aims to improve continually the value for money of its maintenance and management activities, and its research programme plays a large part in this. Value engineering appraisals are carried out before any maintenance project is finalised.

The Government are also developing a best value regime for local authority services. Under these proposals, each local authority will consult on its performance standards and each year report on their performance against those standards. There will also be periodic reviews within each authority for service to examine rigorously how performance can be improved. The best value regime will apply to highway maintenance for local authority roads.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been paid by road authorities throughout the UK in compensation to road users for accidents or damage to vehicles as a result of poorly maintained roads in each of the last five years. [50884]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Responsibility for roads in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland rests with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland respectively.

Within England, information relating to compensation paid to road users on roads that are the responsibility of local authorities is not collected centrally.

For trunk roads and motorways in England it is not possible to separate out the compensation paid specifically as a result of poor maintenance.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the monetary value of the national and local road network in the UK. [50882]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency has undertaken a valuation of the 10,000 km motorway and trunk road network in England using both professional advisers and Agency staff. This evaluation was produced for the Department's forthcoming Resource Accounts and was prepared in accordance with the Treasury's Resource Accounting Manual. As at 1 April 1997, the network was valued at around £60 billion.

No research has been commissioned by the Department on the monetary value of the local road network.

Treaty of Canterbury

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list those organisations and individuals which have made representations to him about the use of Clause 33.3 in the Treaty of Canterbury; [51168]

(2) what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have had with (i) Eurotunnel, (ii) the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority, (iii) the French Government, (iv) the Kent Fire Service and (v) the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regarding the use of Clause 33.3 in the Treaty of Canterbury. [51169]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My hon. Friend is the only individual or organisation to have raised Clause 33.3 of the Channel Tunnel Concession Agreement (there is no such clause in the Treaty of Canterbury) with the Government since the General Election.

As far as I am aware, since the Channel Tunnel Concession Agreement was drawn up in 1986 the only discussions on this Clause between my officials, Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, Eurotunnel and the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority have been in the context of preparing replies to Questions posed by my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich and for Thurrock (Mr. MacKinlay). There have been no discussions at Ministerial level or with the French Government or with the Kent Fire Service.

London Underground

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the names of *(a)* consultants and *(b)* legal advisers employed by London Transport to provide advice on the sale of London Underground and the estimated cost of employing each company. [51189]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Underground is not for sale. Freshfields and PricewaterhouseCoopers are providing, respectively, legal and financial advice jointly to the Government and London Transport on implementing our plans for a Public/Private Partnership. Competitions are currently underway for other specialist advisers.

For reasons of commercial confidentiality, it is not possible to give a figure for the estimated value of the contracts. We will, of course, report aggregate figures for the total cost of advice on implementing the Public/Private Partnership, in due course.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many companies to date have expressed an interest in taking a stake in London Underground infrastructure. [51193]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Companies will not be asked formally to express their interest in infrastructure contracts until next year. But London Transport has placed a notice in the *Official Journal* of the European Community inviting firms to take part in a consultation process on our proposals for a Public/Private Partnership. London Transport also hosted a market sounding conference on 16 July which was attended by delegates from around 200 organisations.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many additional staff have been employed by his Department to deal with the transfer of London Underground infrastructure to the private sector. [51173]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No additional staff have been employed by my Department to work on our plans for a Public/Private Partnership for London Underground.

Internal reorganisation has taken place to ensure that adequate resources are in place to enable our proposals to be implemented as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision has been made for additional subsidies to be paid to London Underground to compensate for the additional costs of transferring infrastructure services to the private sector. [51192]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The aim will be to let contracts which are affordable from LU's own resources, on the basis of projected revenue flows. Unless it represents poor value for money, payments to the contractor or contractors will be profiled so as to avoid the need for subsidy.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the contractual basis on which London Underground staff will be transferred to the private sector for the purpose of the planned London Underground restructuring. [51209]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The majority of London Underground staff will remain with the publicly owned and publicly accountable operating company. It makes sense for some staff to transfer with their work to the private sector contractor or contractors. The means of transfer has yet to be decided but the Deputy Prime Minister has already given firm commitments on the protection of staff rights under the contracts of employment, covering pay, hours, leave, collective agreements and unions representation, as well as on issues such as pensions and concessionary travel.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those organisations invited to attend the seminar hosted by London Transport on the procedures to be adopted for the transfer of London Underground infrastructure to the private sector. [51376]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Around 200 organisations were invited, including rail industry suppliers and contractors, banks and other financiers, project management specialists, legal and financial advisers and consulting engineers. I shall write further to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the contractual arrangements for the restructuring of London Underground to be completed. [51528]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We aim to award the one, two or three infrastructure contracts for the London Underground Public-Private Partnership by April 2000.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the London Underground conference held on 16 July. [51737]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The conference was designed to start a consultation with potential bidders and their financiers about how best to implement the Government's Public-Private Partnership for the London Underground. Around 200 organisations were invited, including rail industry suppliers and contractors, banks and other financiers, project management specialists, legal and financial advisers and consulting engineers. The conference was welcomed by those present and represented a successful start to the more detailed consultation process which will now follow.

Airports

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when *(a)* he or *(b)* other Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials last met BAA plc to discuss airport capacity in the South East of England. [51214]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have met BAA plc on four occasions since 2 May 1997. None of these engagements was arranged specifically to discuss airport capacity in the South East of England. Discussions covered a range of issues. I understand the same is true for the other Ministers in my Department. Officials within my Department met BAA on 14 July 1998 and, among other topics, did discuss airport capacity in the South East of England.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many slots are operated by each airline at (i) Heathrow and (ii) Gatwick airports. [51149]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government do not collect this information themselves, but from reports prepared by Airport Co-ordination Ltd., I can provide the figure for the ten carriers that hold the most slots for the current summer season.

	Slots	*Percentage*
Heathrow		
British Airways	97,455	37
British Midland	35,497	13
Lufthansa	11,280	4
Aer Lingus	9,076	3
SAS	8,340	3
Iberia	6,300	2
American Airlines	6,299	2
United Airlines	6,010	2
KLM	5,820	2
Alitalia	5,520	2

	Slots	Percentage
Gatwick		
British Airways	37,558	27
City Flyer	18,657	13
Jersey European	5,877	4
Monarch	5,262	4
GB Airways	4,973	4
Air 2000	4,930	4
Britannia	4,673	3
Caledonian	4,469	3
Air Tours International	3,394	2
Air World	2,534	2

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department will carry out an assessment of the benefits and disbenefits of the three major South East airports being owned by the same operator. [51374]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have no plans to do so. Under the Airports Act 1986 the Civil Aviation Authority can impose whatever conditions might be appropriate to remedy the effects of anti-competitive behaviour by an airport operator. In the 1996 quinquennial review, the MMC reported that it had not found any course of conduct by BAA London airports for which a change in the structure of their ownership would be an appropriate remedy.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking or plans to take following the decision by BAA to give sole access to Terminal Five at Heathrow to British Airways and its alliance partners. [51375]

Ms Glenda Jackson: BAA announced in 1997 that it would provisionally be designating British Airways as the main user of Terminal 5. Decisions on the allocation of terminal facilities are a matter for the airport operator; I understand that BAA's announcement followed a process of consultation with all interested parties.

Channel Tunnel

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what conclusions were reached between Eurotunnel, the Kent Fire Brigade and the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority regarding the operation of a fire service by Eurotunnel in the Channel Tunnel. [51174]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No proposal has been received from Eurotunnel regarding the operation of the First Line of Response (FLOR) fire service in the Channel Tunnel. If such a proposal is made it will be considered by the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority who will advise the Intergovernmental Commission.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each DVLA office the number of staff employed on enforcement duties, the number of cases handled and the estimated income generated in each of the last five years. [51171]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information is not available in the format requested for the full 5 year period. The VED enforcement breakdown for the current DVLA local office network for 1997–98 is as follows:

VED enforcement

VRO	Number of cases	Revenue (£)	Staff in post 31 March 1998
Aberdeen	4,023	274,141	3.0
Inverness	1,194	66,806	1.0
Dundee	6,457	414,014	5.0
Middlesbrough	9,892	890,740	10.0
Newcastle	14,060	980,013	14.5
Carlisle	4,838	465,644	4.5
Edinburgh	14,737	948,168	14.0
Glasgow	21,089	1,346,426	18.5
Manchester	19,028	2,068,716	25.5
Bangor	6,146	655,354	8.5
Chester	7,284	812,031	6.0
Leeds	19,344	2,226,519	31.0
Preston	26,235	2,616,454	39.5
Worcester	18,720	1,762,634	15.5
Birmingham	33,432	3,859,486	22.5
Shrewsbury	12,050	1,252,187	16.0
Sheffield	12,935	1,122,757	16.0
Beverley	8,705	695,177	8.0
Luton	26,566	3,162,624	23.5
Ipswich	7,913	739,274	11.0
Norwich	8,181	857,528	10.5
Lincoln	10,690	1,209,380	12.0
Nottingham	27,161	3,253,141	18.5
Peterborough	18,280	2,217,178	20.0
Northampton	13,966	1,588,363	15.0
Cardiff	16,861	1,717,954	23.0
Swansea	13,231	1,313,903	11.5
Truro	4,864	408,313	6.5
Exeter	16,216	1,573,341	21.5
Bristol	15,850	1,748,863	24.0
Reading	5,204	622,199	9.0
Portsmouth	14,798	1,253,925	19.0
Oxford	7,586	850,972	9.0
Bournemouth	8,352	911,218	9.5
Brighton	14,793	1,711,110	23.2
Chelmsford	30,401	3,864,330	30.0
Maidstone	18,857	2,005,362	20.0
Sidcup	61,239	4,718,806	111.0
Wimbledon	30,085	4,969,520	52.0
Stanmore[1]	—	—	19.0
Grand Total	611,263	[2]63,153,669	757.7

[1] Stanmore VRO does not process Enforcement work but has 19 outstationed Inquiry Officers

[2] In addition revenue generated from Campaigns against evasion of Vehicle Excise Duty amounted to £3.642 million

In the last five years the staff deployed, total cases completed and the revenue generated from the VED Enforcement effort is as follows:

Year	Staff deployed	Total cases completed	Revenue generated (£ million)
1993–94	946	696,000	65
1994–95	916	714,000	68
1995–96	874	747,000	74
1996–97	762	710,000	71
1997–98	758	635,000	[1]67

[1] In addition £8.5 million was generated through the Agency Wheelclamping scheme

The reduced staff deployment has been possible through the use of more efficient working practices and changes in procedures.

Motor Vehicles

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing a mandatory mileage registration scheme for motor vehicles. [51178]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Although detailed costings have not been estimated, a mandatory requirement for the provision of mileage information on DVLA forms would have significant implications for the overall operating costs of the Agency's national vehicle register. Some 17 million transactions a year could be affected.

Marine Safety Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each of the last five years the number of marine surveyors employed in each Marine Safety Agency office. [51180]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Figures requested are given in the table. Figures are the actual number of Marine Surveyor staff in post as at 1 April for each of the five years. The Marine Safety Agency merged with the Coastguard Agency to become the Maritime and Coastguard Agency on 1 April 1998. The Headquarters office is based at Southampton, along with the Regional Marine Office.

Staff in post figures, as at 1 April

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Headquarters	58	64	56.5	54	54
Southampton	17	14	14	14	13
Orpington	17	16	14	11	13
Great Yarmouth	1	4	4	3	3
Plymouth	5	5	5	5	5
Falmouth	2	3	3	3	3
Beverley	10.5	10	9.5	9	8
Newcastle	15.5	12	10	9	8
Liverpool	14	12	9.5	9	9
Middlesborough	2	2	3	3	4
Cardiff	8	6	5	5	4
Milford Haven	0	1	1	1	1
Avon	1	Closed	—	—	—
Aberdeen	14	15	12	12	14
Glasgow	15	18	12	13	13
Belfast	5	6	4	4	4
Leith	3	[1] —	3	3	3
Stella Ness	1	1	1	1	1
Total	189	189	166.5	159	160

[1] Figures for Leith included with Glasgow total

Coastguard

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by coastguard station for each of the last three months the number of days that the station was staffed below the minimum watch level. [51179]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no minimum watch levels for Her Majesty's Coastguard Co-ordinating Centres. Suggested watch levels were set out in the 'Focus for Change' review and can be varied locally following an assessment of perceived and actual operational demand and risk. I have placed in the Library a table which shows, by station and date, the number of hours when watch levels were below these levels for the months of April, May and June.

Bus Employees Superannuation Trust

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to come to a decision on the legal case involving the BEST Pension Scheme. [51166]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Decisions will be taken at the appropriate time, consistent with our hope that all outstanding legal matters concerning the former National Bus Company pension funds are satisfactorily resolved as soon as possible.

Millennium Compliance

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its NDPBs and *(c)* its executive agencies, the target date for millennium compliance. [51191]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions now publishes plans on the Internet which show targets for millennium compliance and progress made against the targets. These plans are reviewed and updated regularly.

The plans show that the Department's centre has a target date of June 1999 for completion of its business critical systems. The Department's executive agencies are working towards target dates for business critical and operational systems which range from December 1998 to June 1999.

Certain of the Department's key NDPBs will be contributing towards the next reports to be published on the Internet in September 1998.

Civil Servants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many civil servants in his Department *(a)* have a degree in science and *(b)* have held a position using that expertise. [50891]

Angela Eagle: We do not hold any central Departmental record of the educational qualifications for staff. However, for the headquarters element of the Department, the personnel database records that 140 members of staff have a science degree and we estimate that 41 per cent. of these staff may be using their degree in their current post. Further information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which sites of special scientific interest in England will be affected by trunk road and motorway schemes for which preferred routes have been announced. [51127]

Mr. Meacher: Trunk roads and motorway schemes in England are subject to the Roads Review. We expect to announce the conclusions of this review later this month.

Housing

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the costs of bringing an empty home back into a good standard of repair. [51116]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department's 1996 English House Condition Survey (EHCS) includes information on the repair costs for vacant dwellings.

The average expenditure required for the comprehensive costs of putting empty homes into good order is identified by the survey at just over £6,500.

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of residential properties in England which have been empty for a year or more. [51118]

Mr. Raynsford: At the time of the 1996 English House Condition Survey, it was estimated that some 415,000 dwellings (2 per cent. of the total housing stock) had been empty for six months or more. The Survey does not provide figures on the number of properties empty for a year or more.

Cycling

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision has been made for cyclists on *(a)* the new Millennium Bridge, *(b)* the rebuilt Hungerford Bridge and *(c)* Southwark Bridge. [50952]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* According to information provided by the London authorities with responsibility for these structures:

The new Millennium Bridge and the rebuilt Hungerford Bridge are for pedestrians. Cyclists will be required to dismount when crossing these bridges.

Provision for cyclists across Southwark Bridge is currently under investigation by the Corporation of London, to connect with the London Cycle Network on the south side.

Specified Risk Material (Incineration)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he *(a)* has given and *(b)* intends to give for the control of emissions in respect of the incineration of specified risk material by power stations. [51242]

Angela Eagle: Specified Risk Material (SRM) is not incinerated in power stations, but is rendered to produce Meat and Bone Meal (MBM). The Environment Agency has published guidance for the control of emissions from the incineration of MBM. The Agency has no intention at present to issue any further guidance.

Coastal Pollution

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has evaluated regarding the effects of major inshore algal blooms on the distribution of pollutants in coastal areas with particular reference to the *(a)* metal absorbing capabilities and *(b)* bubble scavenging properties of algae. [51384]

Angela Eagle: My Department has not commissioned any research on these questions, and is not aware of any recent relevant work commissioned by others.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has evaluated on the potential health risks of foam and sludge deposits left by Phacosystic algae blooms on the shore line. [51385]

Angela Eagle: My Department has commissioned no research on this question.

Air Safety

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has evaluated into the impact of electromagnetic pulses from military craft on civilian airliners; and if he will make a statement. [51090]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As part of an international programme, the Civil Aviation Authority has undertaken research and implemented certification requirements to ensure that civil aircraft are immune to the adverse effects of exposure to electro-magnetic pulses and transmissions, from sources external to aircraft.

Reclamation

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce regulations to give the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency increased powers to withdraw licences for the operation of reclamation processes for reasons relating to the protection of human health and the environment. [51092]

Angela Eagle: The Health and Safety Executive has powers to prohibit any work activity which involves or will involve a risk of serious personal injury. The Environment Agency has powers, under section 38 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, to revoke a waste management licence which has been issued for a reclamation process where the continuation of the activities authorised by the licence would cause pollution of the environment or harm to human health. We have no evidence that these powers are not adequate and we have no plans to increase them.

GRP Tanks

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the occasions on which, and the locations where collapses of glass reinforced plastic tanks with PVC linings have been investigated by *(a)* the Health and Safety Executive and *(b)* the Environment Agency in the last 10 years; if he will publish their conclusions in each case; and if he will make a statement. [51055]

Angela Eagle: The information requested could be compiled only at disproportionate cost.

Environmental Prosecutions

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many

businesses have been prosecuted successfully for breaches of environmental standards since 1990 in Derbyshire. [51091]

Angela Eagle: This information is not held centrally. The Environment Agency took on responsibility for managing and regulating the water environment and controlling industrial pollution and wastes in England and Wales on 1 April 1996. Between then and 31 March 1998 it undertook 17 successful prosecutions for environmental offences committed in Derbyshire. Local authorities and other bodies also have responsibility for enforcing some environmental controls.

Tankers

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those incidents involving the leaking of chemicals from tankers broken down by leakages which occurred while the tankers were *(a)* at the point of origin, *(b)* in transit and *(c)* at the point of destination which have been investigated by (i) the Health and Safety Executive and (ii) the Environment Agency during the past 10 years, indicating the conclusions of such inquiries; and if he will make a statement. [51056]

Angela Eagle: The Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR 95), require certain types of Dangerous Occurrence to be reported to the relevant enforcing authority. One category of Dangerous Occurrence concerns any incident involving a road tanker or tank container used for the carriage of dangerous goods where the tank or tank container overturns, is seriously damaged, is involved in a fire, or where the contents escape.

A similar category of Dangerous Occurrence was also included in the previous regulations, RIDDOR 1985.

During the last ten years the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has investigated 124 such Dangerous Occurrences which have involved a loss of containment of dangerous goods from tankers or tank containers, of which

43 occurred at the point of origin;

54 occurred while in transit;

27 occurred at the point of destination.

The action taken by HSE as a result of their investigations includes advice, letters, enforcement notices and in some cases prosecution. I have arranged for a detailed breakdown of the 124 Dangerous Occurrences investigated by HSE to be placed in the Library.

Vessels (Survival Suits)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the types of vessels required to carry survival suits for crew members; what regulations govern the provision of this equipment; and if he will make a statement. [50847]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Passenger ships of Classes I, II and II(A) and Cargo ships of Classes VII-VIII(A)(t) and XI are required to carry immersion (survival) suits. The carriage requirements for these vessels are detailed in the Merchant Shipping (Life-saving Appliance) regulations 1986, SI No. 1066.

The Merchant Shipping (High-Speed Craft) Regulations 1996 No. 3188, identifies the requirements for the carriage of immersion suits on High Speed Craft.

Rail Services

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement concerning the number of complaints made to rail companies. [51669]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Rail Regulator published on 1 July 1998 a bulletin of passenger complaints made to the train operating companies in 1997–98 which reported that nearly 1,000,000 complaints were received by the operators during the year, representing 115 complaints per 100,000 passenger journeys. These figures show a high level of passenger dissatisfaction with the railway. Train operators must listen to what their passengers are telling them and take action to address passengers' concerns.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the number of complaints made to Virgin Trains over the West Coast Main Line service. [51668]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Rail Regulator's bulletin of rail complaints, published on 1 July, indicates that 119,266 complaints were made in writing to Virgin West Coast during 1997–98. Quality of service on the West Coast service was poor during much of the year, mainly owing to problems with rolling stock and infrastructure. I am pleased that Virgin Trains has taken action to bring about some improvements. We look to the Franchising Director to work with Virgin Rail, involving Railtrack where necessary, to ensure that this trend is maintained and, where there are still shortcomings, improved.

Aircraft (Disease Transmission)

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will conduct an investigation into the transmission of disease through the air-conditioning systems of jet airliners. [51672]

Ms Glenda Jackson: To date there has been no evidence to suggest that there is a link between cabin air quality, flow rates and the spread of disease. Even when the air conditioning is set at its lowest level, the air in a modern aircraft cabin is completely changed every three minutes on average. This is well above the standard for public buildings.

We have no plans to conduct any research into this issue at present.

Dorset County Council

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will request the Audit Commission to investigate Dorset County Council's *(a)* social services funding and *(b)* expenditure on moneys on an office in Brussels. [51673]

Mr. Raynsford: No. The conduct of the audit of Dorset County Council is a matter for the independent external auditor appointed by the Audit Commission.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the statutory basis of already approved trials of genetically modified crops. [51561]

Mr. Meacher: Trials of genetically modified crops are approved by the relevant Secretaries of State under Part IV of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 1992 (amended 1995 and 1997). Together these implement Directive 90/220/EEC on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms to the environment and the subsequent amendments to the directive.

Heathrow Express

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria in respect of *(a)* safety and *(b)* compensation to passengers were adopted by his Department in the licensing process for the Heathrow Express. [51796]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Heathrow Express had to meet full safety case requirements as set out in the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 1994 before their passenger licence could be granted. However, the licence was not issued with a "through-ticketing and network benefits" condition, owing to the specialised nature of the Heathrow Express service. For example, the station at Heathrow is exempt from the Railways Act 1993 and therefore exempt from the standard train operator ticket retailing agreements (and therefore the usual passenger protections under the conditions of carriage arrangements).

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he received from the Office of the Rail Regulator concerning the licensing of the Heathrow Express. [51776]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Heathrow Express passenger licence was granted by the Secretary of State. No formal representations were received from the Rail Regulator and his office was consulted throughout the licensing process.

Low Flying

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what channels are available to members of the public wishing to complain about low-flying helicopters; and what action is taken once a complaint is received. [51775]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Members of the Public wishing to complain about civil helicopter activities should contact the Aviation Regulation Enforcement and Investigation Branch of the Civil Aviation Authority, CAA House, 45–59 Kingsway, London WC2B 6TE. The CAA can also be contacted both during office hours and out of hours on 0171 832 5854. This number is also available to all Police Forces and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Complaints about military helicopter activities should be addressed to the Ministry of Defence.

On receipt of a complaint, a preliminary investigation is carried out to determine if the complaint indicates a breach of legislation or is about noise and nuisance. If it is the latter, then the immunity granted by Section 76 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 precludes any further action.

Section 76 says that if the aircraft was being flown in accordance with the regulations governing aircraft flight, then no prosecution can be made for trespass or nuisance. However, if there appears to be a breach of aviation legislation, steps are taken to identify the machine and the pilot responsible and to ascertain if there are any exemptions or permissions in issue which would account for the observed activity. If it then appears that the flight was in breach of the rules and also that there is a reasonable prospect of obtaining sufficient evidence suitable for presentation to a court, a full criminal investigation is carried out and evidence is taken by a CAA Investigation Officer in accordance with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, 1984.

When the investigation is complete, a report is raised which is examined against the guidelines given in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. If it meets these guidelines, the Authority may dispose of the matter by means of a Warning Letter, by administering a formal caution under the Attorney-General's guidelines, or, for the most serious breaches, by prosecuting. The Authority also has the power to take licensing action against any pilot found to be in breach of the legislation.

Planning

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends to implement the amended EIA Directive for planning in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [51897]

Mr. Caborn: The Government have today issued draft Regulations to implement the requirements of the amending EIA Directive (97/11/EC) into the Town and Country Planning System in England and Wales. A copy of the draft Regulations has been placed in the Library.

The amending Directive does not bring fundamental changes to the existing system and we have taken the opportunity to consolidate, as well as amend, the existing provisions. The two previous consultation exercises on implementation of the Directive have brought support for the Government's approach, including the use of thresholds or criteria to assist planning authorities in deciding whether or not a development requires Environmental Impact Assessment. The level and application of these criteria have been set after consultation, but to ensure the maximum protection for the environment and the minimum burden on planning authorities and developers, the system will be reviewed after two years of operation.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the implications for housing and regeneration policy of the Chancellor's oral statement of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, on the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review. [51923]

Ms Armstrong: I am tomorrow placing in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office a statement outlining the changes to housing and regeneration policy resulting from the Review.

Service Charges

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will enable disputes over the reasonableness of service charges between landlords and long leaseholders where court proceedings began before 1 September 1997 to be transferred to leasehold valuation tribunals. [51925]

Ms Armstrong: Following consultation with interested parties, I have made a further Commencement Order under the Housing Act 1996 which will take effect on 11 August 1998. From that date, a court will have the discretion to allow service charge disputes which started before 1 September 1997 to be transferred to leasehold valuation tribunals, where the court considers the interests of justice would best be served.

WALES

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the total sum to be allocated out of the Welsh budget to local authorities in Wales in each of the three years covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review. [51459]

Mr. Ron Davies: It is my intention to issue a consultation paper in September, the results of which will inform my decisions on the most appropriate way to allocate the Welsh budget. I have already met the Welsh Local Government Association and they will participate in the consultation process. I will announce the allocations later in the year.

Buses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to promote the provision of bus services in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [51210]

Mr. Hain: The Government's integrated transport policy is based on the promotion of public transport, including bus services. We have already made an additional £2.25 million available to Welsh local authorities this year for new and enhanced bus services in rural areas. Further details were set out in the White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" and will be included in the complementary transport policy statement for Wales.

DEFENCE

Chemical and Biological Defence Sector

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment has made of the long-term effect on human health of short-term exposure to chlorine. [49991]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about short term exposure to chlorine.

DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD) has not carried out any formal assessment of the long term effects on human health of short term exposure to chlorine.

CBD is aware, however, of the general toxicology and health effects of chlorine gas, as reported in the open literature, particularly in reaction to exposure occurring through industrial accidents.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the titles of the reports published in the Chemical Defence Establishment Technical Paper series which were produced as unclassified papers. [50022]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the unclassified reports published by the Chemical Defence Establishment.

I have arranged for a list of the unclassified Technical Paper series published by the Chemical Defence Establishment, the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment and DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector to be placed in the House library.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent research has been carried out by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment to investigate whether short-term exposure to adamsite (DM) can cause long-term illnesses; when this research was carried out; and what were the results. [49987]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about short term exposure to adamsite (DM).

DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD) has not conducted research involving exposure to adamsite (DM) for over 30 years. No assessment of possible long term health effects resulting from short term exposure to adamsite has been made.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment has carried out to investigate the long-term human health effects of short-term exposure to 1-methoxycycloheptatriene (1-MCHT); when this research was carried out; and what were the conclusions. [49989]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about short term exposure to 1-methoxycycloheptatriene.

DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD) conducted a small number of human volunteer trials involving eye only exposure to 1-methoxycycloheptatriene (1-MCHT) from 1984 to 1985.

The trials involved 19 volunteers who were exposed for between 10 to 30 seconds to concentrations of 5.0 milligrammes per cubic metre of air. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the irritancy of the compound.

No assessment has been made of possible long term effects of short term exposures to 1-MCHT.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many research contracts and agreements in universities are currently being funded by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment; what is the total value of these research projects; how many of these research projects are classified; and if he will list the universities at which these research projects are being funded. [49986]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about university research contracts funded by DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD).

CBD currently funds 60 research contracts and agreements with universities. The total value of the research is approximately £5,900,000. None of the research projects are classified.

The contracts and agreements are with the following universities:

London

Birmingham

Sheffield

Ulster

Exeter

Durham

Oxford

Bath

Hertfordshire

Dundee

Plymouth

Cambridge

Bristol

Southampton

Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Manchester

St. Andrews

Hull

Warwick

Huddersfield

University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology

University College of London.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment has made of the effects of short-term exposure to phosgene. [50023]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about short term exposure to phosgene.

DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector is currently undertaking studies to determine the short term effects of exposure to phosgene. The studies are part of an ongoing research programme to develop medical countermeasures against chemical warfare agents. We would be happy to provide the results of this work when they are published in the open literature.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research has been carried out by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment to investigate whether short-term exposure to mustard gas can cause long-term illnesses; when this research was carried out; and what were the results. [49995]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about short term exposure to the chemical blister agent mustard.

In the past, DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD) has conducted trials, as part of its service volunteer programme, involving the chemical blister agent mustard. These studies were not intended to evaluate the long term effects of this agent following short term exposure.

Assessments made by CBD concerning possible long term effects of exposure to mustard have been based on numerous epidemiological studies published in the open literature.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the next inspection of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment by the Health and Safety Executive is planned to take place. [49988]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 21 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about inspections by the Health and Safety Executive.

The Health and Safety Executive does not publish a long term programme of its future inspections. DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence sector (CBD) is not therefore aware of the date of its next inspection.

Project Horizon

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the progress of Project Horizon; [51064]

(2) how many Horizon New Generation frigates he intends to purchase. [51254]

Mr. Spellar: The Programme Memorandum of Understanding, MOU, for the Common New Generation Frigate, Project Horizon, was signed by the United Kingdom, Italy and France in July 1994, with its supplement for Project Definition and Initial Design signed in March 1996. The Programme MOU for the vessel's Principal Anti-Air Missile System, PAAMS, and the supplement covering its Full Scale Engineering Development and initial Production, FSED/IP, were also signed in March 1996.

Since MOU signatures, negotiations on PAAMS FSED/IP have made progress and the tri-national contract is scheduled to be placed later this year. Project Definition studies on Horizon are well advanced with further work due to commence shortly and scheduled to be completed next year, with the next stage being the placing of the design and build contract for the nations' three first-of-class ships.

It is currently expected that 12 Horizon frigates will enter service with the Royal Navy.

European Defence Industry

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what international agreements he intends to negotiate to facilitate restructuring of the European defence industry. [51252]

Mr. Spellar: On 6 July 1998, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence signed a Letter of Intent with European Defence Ministers designed to facilitate the restructuring of the European defence industry. This Letter of Intent identifies potential obstacles to industrial restructuring in six key areas, together with possible means of removing them. The six areas are:

Security of Supply

Export Procedures

Security of Information

Harmonisation of Research and Technology

Treatment of Technical Information

Harmonisation of Military Requirements.

Expert working groups are being established to take forward detailed negotiations with the aim of removing the potential obstacles in each area. Solutions to the problems identified by the Working Groups will be set out in subsequent international agreements or arrangements. The legal status of these agreements has still to be decided. That said, I would hope the negotiations would be concluded within the next 12 months.

Russia (Joint Exercises)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Royal Air Force conducted joint exercises with the Russian Air Force during the last five years. [48576]

Mr. George Robertson: The Royal Air Force has not exercised with the Russian Air Force during the last five years, although RAF aircraft have exercised with Russian aircraft belonging to other elements of the Russian Armed Forces. The RAF contributed a C-130 aircraft and 19 personnel from the Tactical Medical Wing to the NATO Exercise, Cooperative Bear between 1–5 September 1997 in Sweden, which also involved a Russian IL 76 aircraft and 32 medical personnel from the Russian Emergency Command.

Spring Quarry, Corsham

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer on 24 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *527*, if he will list the functions which have been carried out in the underground part of the site at Spring Quarry, Corsham, since 1968. [51132]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1968, and until its closure in 1995, the underground site at Spring Quarry, Corsham was used by the MOD as a bulk storage area with both military and civil communication facilities. Other functions carried out on the site were in support of these tasks, for example the servicing of transport vehicles for use in the stores.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *569*, on AWE, Aldermaston, if he will place a list of the titles of the 14 quarterly analysis reports produced by the Directorate of Quality Assurance at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in the Library, indicating the date on which each paper was produced. [51135]

Mr. Spellar: I am today placing a list in the Library of the House.

Asbestos

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the policy of his Department on the use of chrysotile asbestos in environmental projects for which his Department is responsible. [51240]

Mr. Spellar: It is Ministry of Defence policy not to use asbestos in projects or to make purchases containing asbestos. Exceptions may be approved only in rare instances where asbestos is essential for satisfactory performance or where the use of any alternative would be equally or more hazardous. In such instances the Department complies with the Statutory regulations governing the use of asbestos.

Eurofighter

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the annual budget for the Eurofighter from 1997–98 to 2002–03. [51757]

Mr. Spellar: Up to 31 March 1998 the UK's expenditure on the Eurofighter programme totalled some £3 billion. Future UK procurement expenditure is currently estimated at £12.9 billion. Figures are at average 1997–98 prices.

Year-on-year spending forecasts for particular projects constitute projections and assumptions which inform advice to Ministers on the affordability of the defence programme. I am, therefore, withholding this information under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Asset Disposals

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his target value for *(a)* the Defence

Estate, *(b)* stocks of missiles and ammunition and *(c)* other stock-holding disposals for the current year and each of the next three years; and how this compares with income from asset disposals in each of the last three years. [51758]

Mr. Spellar: Over the next four years, estimated receipts from the disposal of MOD land and buildings amount to £700 million, including £200 million in the current year. Year by year breakdowns for future years are not yet available. Disposals over the last three years amounted to £75 million, £180 million and £140 million respectively.

Receipts from the sales of equipment, spares and munitions over the last three years have amounted to some £80 million per annum. This level is expected to be maintained over the next four years.

Departmental Holdings

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 22, on Departmental holdings, if he will also include in such consultations representatives of the Scottish and Welsh National Farmers Unions and the Farming Union of Wales. [51227]

Mr. Spellar: We would be happy to seek the views of these bodies and they will also be contacted later in the year.

TRACER Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money the United Kingdom has spent on the TRACER project to date. [51061]

Mr. Spellar: Expenditure by the Ministry of Defence on the Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement, TRACER, programme currently amounts to £7.3 million at 1998–99 prices. This does not include the cost of government research into systems which may come to be incorporated in the design of the vehicle, nor any costs incurred by the private sector.

Casualty Receiving Ship

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the in-service date of the primary casualty receiving ship which he proposes to purchase. [51065]

Mr. Spellar: Options for the procurement of two new primary casualty receiving ships are currently being explored. It is expected that a decision on the way forward, including estimated in service dates will be made early next year.

Smart Procurement Policy

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will introduce longer tours of duty for officers overseeing defence projects under his Smart Procurement Policy. [51076]

Mr. George Robertson: This option is already being looked at as part of the implementation of the Smart Procurement Initiative.

European Aerospace Industry

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the proposals which he has received from European companies on the restructuring of the European aerospace industry. [51060]

Mr. Spellar: On 9 December 1997 the heads of Government in France, Germany and the UK issued a trilateral statement which recognised the urgent need for the European aerospace and defence electronics industries to rationalise, and urged industry to present their plans for restructuring and integration.

Proposals from industry on the restructuring of the European aerospace industry have been received in the strictest confidence. Details cannot, therefore, be divulged, in accordance with Exemption 13 to the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The proposals are being carefully considered by officials who, while recognising that the detailed structure is for industry to establish, will seek to do all they can to help facilitate the process.

Multi-role Armoured Vehicles

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the progress of the MRAV project; [51253]

(2) how many multi-role armoured vehicles he intends to purchase. [51255]

Mr. Spellar: Following the joint announcement with France and Germany on 22 April of our intention to proceed with collaborative development and initial production of the Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle, MRAV, and of the selection of the trilateral consortium "Eurokonsortium" as the preferred bidder, we have set work in hand to prepare a Memorandum of Understanding between the three nations. Detailed contract negotiations with the consortium are also proceeding. The initial production order will include 200 vehicles for each nation. No decisions have been taken on the final numbers required.

Procurement Policy

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the McKinsey report into defence procurement. [51072]

Mr. Spellar: No. This report constitutes advice to Ministers, and I am withholding it under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

European Collaboration

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future development of the Organisme Conjointe de Co-operation en Matière d'Armament. [51059]

Mr. Spellar: The UK is playing a full part in the continuing development of the Organisme Conjointe de Cooperation en Matière d'Armament, OCCAR, which provides an opportunity to improve the way we conduct collaborative business with our European partners. With our partners, we are currently seeking legal status for the Organisation and are exploring various options to achieve

this. Legal status would allow OCCAR to place and manage contracts under agreed procurement procedures on the basis of best practice. OCCAR already manages existing Franco-German collaborative equipment programmes and agreement has been reached for the integration of projects involving the UK.

Joint Strike Fighter

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress on the Joint Strike Fighter. [51073]

Mr. Spellar: The US-led Joint Strike Fighter Concept Demonstration Phase, in which the UK is participating as a collaborative partner, aims to reduce risk prior to entry into full development. Steady progress is being made towards the first flights of the Concept Demonstration aircraft which are scheduled for the year 2000.

Combat Engineer Tractor

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress his Department has made on the replacement for the Combat Engineer Tractor. [51069]

Mr. Spellar: Feasibility Studies into the replacement for Combat Engineer Tractor, known as Terrier, have been successfully completed and we are currently considering the case for moving to Project Definition.

Defence Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Centre, Winterbourne Gunner

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when work will commence on new buildings at the Defence NBC Centre at Winterbourne Gunner; and what contingency plans have been made with police, fire and emergency planning authorities. [51251]

Mr. Spellar: On current planning, contracts for the work to be undertaken at the Defence NBC Centre, Winterbourne Gunner are expected to be let in October 1998, with a view to construction starting in November 1998. Construction work will take place on areas that have been cleared of old buildings. Archaeological and technical surveys of the site have not revealed anything which would require specific contingency plans other than the normal responses from the emergency services.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress his Department has made in the development of unmanned aerial vehicles. [51161]

Mr. Spellar: Good progress continues to be made on the Phoenix unmanned air vehicle and on training the regiments that will use it. I expect the system to be in service by the end of this year, providing target acquisition support to our artillery systems. We are also examining the potential of unmanned air vehicles in the context of meeting longer-term requirements, including battlefield reconnaissance and the future offensive air system.

Future Escort Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department on the Future Escort Project. [51068]

Mr. Spellar: The Future Escort, which will replace the existing Type 22 and 23 frigates, is currently in the pre-feasibility phase, with a Staff Target planned for late 1999. We are examining all aspects of the proposed warship, including her hull design. A number of hull forms are being considered, including the trimaran. A contract is to be let shortly by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency for a Trimaran Demonstrator vessel which will be used to determine the operational characteristics of this type of hull form through sea-going trials scheduled to be completed by 2002. Initial trials results will be available mid 2001 to enable the MOD to make a decision as to whether the trimaran hull form will be adopted as the basis of the Future Escort design.

Landing Ship Logistics Vessels

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the timetable for the procurement of the two new landing ship logistics vessels. [51075]

Mr. Spellar: We are investigating options for the procurement of two new landing ship logistics. We expect to make a decision on the way forward, including target in service dates, in the early part of 1999.

Submarines

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to place a firm order for two further Astute Class submarines. [51063]

Mr. Spellar: On current plans, we expect to place an order for two new Astute Class submarines early in the next century.

Future Carrier-borne Aircraft

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what options he is assessing for the Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft. [51067]

Mr. Spellar: No decisions have yet been taken on a future carrier borne aircraft but a version of the Joint Strike Fighter programme currently underway in the United States remains a strong contender. We are currently participating in the concept demonstration phase. Several other possible solutions are also under consideration. These include Short Take Off but Arrested Landing; conventional carrier aircraft with steam catapult assisted take off and arrested landing; and a further development of the Harrier aircraft.

Container Ships

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the in-service date of the four additional roll-on roll-off container ships he intends to purchase. [51071]

Mr. Spellar: It is anticipated that the four additional roll-on roll-off ships will be available for operational service from 2000. Options for the procurement of these vessels are currently being considered.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were *(a)* the budget and *(b)* the personnel numbers available to the Defence Medical Services in each of the last 10 years. [44216]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 8 June 1998]:* I have written to the hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter is being placed in the Library.

SCOTLAND

Domestic Violence

11. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals his Department has to protect women from domestic violence. [49924]

Mr. McLeish: Tackling domestic violence is a priority for the Scottish Office. We are now setting up a Scottish Partnership on Domestic Violence to bring together all the key interests in developing a strategy and in promoting better services for abused women.

Investment

12. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland to discuss prospects for investment in Scotland. [49925]

Mr. Dewar: I maintain regular contact with CBI Scotland on a range of issues. I believe the prospects for investment in Scotland remain excellent.

Dounreay

13. **Mr. Maclean:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next plans to visit the Dounreay reprocessing plant to discuss its operation. [49927]

Mr. Dewar: Operational matters at Dounreay are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. I have no plans to visit the reprocessing plant to discuss its operation.

Higher Education

14. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate the cost of waiving the fourth year of fees liable to be paid by students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland attending undergraduate courses at Scottish universities. [49929]

Mr. Wilson: The total estimate is some £2 million based on the latest student numbers and estimates of their family income. Of course, students from less well-off families will not pay fees in any of the four years.

21. **Mr. Jenkin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations his Department has received on the waiving of the fourth year of fees liable to be paid by students from England, Wales or Northern Ireland attending undergraduate courses at Scottish universities. [49936]

Mr. Wilson: I have received representations on the waiving of fourth year fees of those liable to pay, from student organisations, higher education representatives, Members of Parliament and others.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many representations he has received *(a)* in support of and *(b)* opposing the policy of introducing tuition fees for students. [49928]

Mr. Wilson: I have received several representations both in support of and opposing the policy of introducing tuition fees. The proposal emerged from the report of the Dearing Committee which was established with cross-party support. The Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals, for example, are in favour of the policy as a way of introducing more money into higher education.

Farm Incomes

15. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about trends in farm income in Scotland. [49930]

Mr. Macdonald: Farm incomes tend to fluctuate. The latest Scottish Office Statistics show that 1997 was a difficult year, despite the highest ever amount of direct support being paid to Scottish farmers, but that 1994, 1995 and 1996 were all good years for much of Scottish Agriculture.

26. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received concerning recent trends in farm income in Scotland. [49941]

Mr. Macdonald: Farm incomes were discussed when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my noble Friend Lord Sewel met the National Farmers Union of Scotland on 26 June.

Naval Establishments

16. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next intends to visit a naval establishment in Scotland to discuss the future of such establishments. [49931]

Mr. Dewar: The future of naval establishments in Scotland is primarily a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I have no plans at present to visit a naval establishment.

Local Government Elections

17. **Mr. Gorrie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received about the date and electoral boundaries for the next local government elections in Scotland. [49932]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations from hon. Members, local authorities, and others both about the date and electoral boundaries for the next local government elections. We believe that the benefits of a combined poll for local authority elections and the Scottish Parliament will outweigh the disadvantages.

Opencast Mining

18. **Mr. Home Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his review of the planning guidelines for opencast mining. [49933]

Mr. Wilson: The current review of Scottish planning policy for opencast coal will be finalised following the announcement of the conclusions reached on the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation being carried out by my right hon. Friend, the President of the Board of Trade.

Town Centres

19. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans the Government have for the regeneration of rural town centres. [49934]

Mr. Macdonald: Regeneration of rural town centres is a matter for local authorities and for the enterprise agencies. The Government provide a framework through National Planning Policy Guidelines, which aim to ensure that planning decisions support rural town centres and encourage good practice through projects like the Small Towns Initiative.

Health Service

20. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the chairmen of health boards to discuss the Carter review of acute services. [49935]

Mr. Galbraith: I met the Chairmen of the East Region Health Boards on Friday 26 June, the day after the publication of the report of the Carter Review of acute services, and that was one of the subjects we discussed.

25. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many representations he has received in connection with the reconfiguration of NHS trusts in Scotland. [49940]

Mr. Galbraith: My right hon. Friend and I have received 206 letters and one petition in connection with the reconfiguration of NHS trusts in Scotland. Copies of all the representations have been passed to the relevant health boards.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many NHS employees have retired early on health grounds in the last five years in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland. [51099]

Mr. Wilson: The number of NHS employees in Scotland who have retired early on health grounds in each of the last five years is given in the table.

Year	*Number*
1993–94	1,214
1994–95	1,082
1995–96	1,064
1996–97	960
1997–98	972

Figures split by employer are not available centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Higher Still

22. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of the implementation of Higher Still. [49937]

Mr. Wilson: Higher Still will bring important improvements to post-16 education in Scotland which are urgently needed. To ensure that these benefits are delivered to our young people on time, over £20 million will have been directly invested in Higher Still by the time the first classes start in 1999. This investment is providing a comprehensive package of support for all Higher Still courses, as well as funding the national staff development programme.

Increasingly, though, the challenge of implementing Higher Still will become a matter for local authorities, schools and colleges. The partnership approach has led to significant progress in the past year in the development of local implementation plans. I am confident that these plans are achievable and will be achieved.

Employment (Dumfries and Galloway)

23. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to visit Dumfries and Galloway to discuss the employment situation. [49938]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has no immediate plans to visit Dumfries and Galloway, but is kept in close touch with developments. I met, last February, Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise to discuss economic development issues.

Special Advisers

24. **Mr. Grieve:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will seek the permission of his Department's special advisers to make public their actual salaries. [49939]

Mr. Dewar: Special Advisers are paid within a national scale at a point which relates to their previous salary in their prior employment. The April 1998 salary range is £24,836-£74,954. Their salaries are negotiated individually and are confidential within this range to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

Caledonian MacBrayne

27. **Mr. Peter Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next plans to meet representatives of Caledonian MacBrayne to discuss operational issues. [49942]

Mr. McLeish: I expect to meet the Managing Director of Caledonian MacBrayne and his colleagues on 1 September.

Fishing Industry

28. **Mrs. Gorman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the fishing industry in Scotland to discuss the prospects for the industry. [49943]

Mr. Macdonald: My noble Friend the Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Fisheries met representatives of the fishing industry on 11 June to discuss the introduction of Fixed Quota Allocations from 1 January 1999.

Accounts Commission

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for improving the *(a)* status and *(b)* performance of the Accounts Commission; and if he will make a statement. [50868]

Mr. Macdonald: Our Manifesto commitment confirms that we are willing to consider extra powers for the Accounts Commission, within Best Value, to monitor local authority performance and promote efficiency. The Scottish Office is currently undertaking the quinquennial Policy and Financial Management Review of the Accounts Commission. This will examine how well the Commission is working, provide reassurance that it is producing the required outputs at an appropriate price and identify any areas for corrective action.

Local Government Officers

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of local government officers retired before normal retirement age in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [50870]

Mr. Macdonald: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Local Authorities (Auditing)

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each Scottish local authority the number of staff employed in the internal audit department in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996 and (iii) 1997; and if he will make a statement. [50871]

Mr. Macdonald: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the planned Scottish Office expenditure for the financial years 1999–2000 to 2001–2002 in cash and real terms by category of expenditure as expressed in table 1.4 of Serving Scotland's Needs, the Government's Expenditure Plans 1998–99, in 1997–98 prices using the GDP deflator, *(b)* the cumulative spending planned from 1999–2000 under each category in real terms and the total cumulative spending over this period in 1997–98 prices using the GDP deflator and *(c)* the difference between these cumulative totals and the amount that would have been spent (i) by category and (ii) for the total Scottish block equivalent assuming that spending was maintained at 1994–95 levels in real terms at current prices using the GDP deflator. [51219]

Mr. Dewar: The tables show the information requested on total Scottish Office expenditure in a format reflecting the new public expenditure control arrangements announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1195–201. It is worth noting that direct comparisons of spending levels in 1994–95 with CSR plans are not meaningful. Definitional changes mean that the comparison is not truly like for like, and the 1994–95 levels of spending were not sustainable given the associated levels of public borrowing.

Table 1: Planned expenditure in cash and real terms

£ million

	Cash			*Real terms (1997–98 prices)*		
	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Departmental expenditure limit[1,2]	13,768	14,431	15,045	13,041	13,336	13,564
Annually managed expenditure						
CAP	300	282	309	284	260	278
Housing support grant	13	13	13	12	12	11
Total assigned budget[3]	14,080	14,726	15,367	13,337	13,608	13,854
New Deal for schools[4,5]	27	27	27	25	25	24
Non-domestic rates[6]	1,441	1,473	1,510	1,365	1,361	1,362
Total budget[7]	15,548	16,225	16,904	14,727	14,994	15,240

Table 2: Cumulative planned expenditure over CSR period (1999–2000 to 2001–02)

£ million

	Cash CSR plans	*Real terms (1997–98 prices) CSR plans*	*Cash if 1994–95 spend maintained in real terms*
Departmental expenditure limit[1,2]	43,244	39,940	44,543
Annually managed expenditure			
CAP	890	823	1,007
Housing support grant	38	35	85

Table 2: Cumulative planned expenditure over CSR period (1999–2000 to 2001–02)

£ million

	Cash CSR plans	*Real terms (1997–98 prices) CSR plans*	*Cash if 1994–95 spend maintained in real terms*
Total assigned budget[3]	44,173	40,798	45,634
New Deal for schools[4,5]	80	74	0
Non-domestic rates[6]	4,425	4,088	3,912
Total budget[7]	48,677	44,960	49,547

[1] Under the new public expenditure control arrangements and devolution, the Barnett formula used to determine Scottish expenditure applies to the Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) in place of the former Scottish Block. Full details of the definitional changes between the DEL and the Control Total were given in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", published in June
[2] Includes provision for the Crown Office, which will be within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament
[3] Total budget assigned to the Scottish Parliament. There are some differences between the coverage of the Assigned Budget and the former Scottish Block, the main one being the exclusion of non-domestic rates. Figures here include expenditure on Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance of around £37 million per year which is included in the DEL but excluded from the Assigned Budget for control purposes until 1999–2000
[4] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99
[5] Total expenditure financed by the Windfall Tax and administered by the Scottish Office. The majority of expenditure on the New Deal is administered for all of Great Britain by DfEE and DSS. Total expenditure in Scotland on the New Deal is projected to be over £450 million in the period 1997–2002
[6] Figures for future years uprated in line with the RPI
[7] Total Scottish public spending within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament or administered by the Scottish Executive

Table 3: Planned expenditure by programme in cash and real terms

£ million

	Cash			*Real terms (1997–98 prices)*		
	1999–00	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*1999–00*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Central Government support for:						
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	5,688	5,864	6,014	5,388	5,419	5,422
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure[2]	345	356	392	327	329	354
Other programme expenditure						
Agriculture, fisheries and food[3]	478	464	496	453	429	448
Arts, libraries and sport	80	82	84	76	76	76
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	1,013	1,070	1,136	959	989	1,024
Student support[4]	320	308	299	304	285	270
Health	4,924	5,214	5,534	4,664	4,818	4,989
Housing[5]	524	634	655	496	585	591
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	555	558	608	526	515	548
Law, order and protective services[7]	487	488	508	461	451	458
Crown Office	51	51	51	48	47	46
Other environmental services	323	325	327	306	300	294
Scottish Parliament and staff	55	80	47	52	74	42
Other Public Services	183	194	191	174	180	172
Roads and Transport[8]	267	270	282	253	250	254
Social Work	74	77	81	70	72	73
European Social Funds and European Regional Development Fund	153	163	173	145	151	156
New Deal for schools[9]	27	27	27	25	25	24
Total budget	15,548	16,226	16,904	14,727	14,994	15,240

Table 4: Cumulative planned expenditure by programme over CSR period (1999–2000 to 2001–02)

£ million

	Cash CSR plans	*Real terms (1997–98 prices) CSR plans*	*Cash if 1994–95 spend maintained in real terms*
Central Government support for:			
Local Authority current expenditure[1]	17,567	16,229	18,967
Local Authority non-housing capital expenditure[2,10]	1,094	1,010	2,497
Other programme expenditure			
Agriculture, fisheries and food[3]	1,439	1,330	1,609
Arts, libraries and sport	246	227	267
Further, higher and other central government education (excluding student support)	3,218	2,972	2,911
Student support[4]	928	859	1,281
Health	15,672	14,471	13,927
Housing[5]	1,812	1,672	1,914

Table 4: Cumulative planned expenditure by programme over CSR period (1999–2000 to 2001–02)

£ million

	Cash CSR plans	*Real terms (1997–98 prices) CSR plans*	*Cash if 1994–95 spend maintained in real terms*
Industry, enterprise and training[6]	1,721	1,590	2,144
Law, order and protective services[7]	1,483	1,370	1,511
Crown Office	153	141	152
Other environmental services[10]	974	900	291
Scottish Parliament and staff	182	168	0
Other Public Services	568	525	590
Roads and Transport[8]	819	757	931
Social Work	232	215	154
European Social Funds and European Regional Development Fund	489	451	401
New Deal for schools[9]	80	74	0
Total budget	48,678	44,961	49,547

[1] Includes non-domestic rate payments, which are outside the DEL
[2] The requirement that local authorities must use 50 per cent. of non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt will be abolished from 1 August 1998. This will allow local authorities to raise an estimated £75 million per annum extra from asset sales
[3] Includes market support under the CAP, which is outside the DEL
[4] Reflects the new Resource Accounting treatment of student loans announced in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998", hence it includes total expenditure on student grants, but only the subsidy element of student loans
[5] Expenditure funded through the Capital Receipts Initiative is now included in the DEL. Housing figures also include Housing Support Grant, which is outside the DEL
[6] This line covers Industry, enterprise and training expenditure administered by the Scottish Office only. Further expenditure administered by other departments on the New Deal is projected to be around £75 million in 1998–99, and almost £90 million per year in each of 1999–2000 to 2001–02
[7] A large proportion of spending on law, order and protective services is included under central government support to local authorities
[8] Includes support to nationalised industries
[9] Includes around £1 million for the New Deal for Young People in 1997–98 and £3 million for Childcare in 1998–99. Additional support for schools' capital expenditure is included in support for non-housing local authority capital expenditure above
[10] The cost of water services in 1994–95 was included in central government capital support to local authorities, but from 1996–97 responsibility switched to the water authorities, whose external finance is included under other environmental services

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *139*, on his plans for allocating total expenditure within his responsibility, if he will give a breakdown of the figure for other environmental services. [51562]

Mr. Dewar: The Other Environmental Services programme covers a wide range of activities. The detailed allocation of resources among the various activities is currently being finalised and will be announced in due course.

Registers of Scotland

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the forthcoming Prior Options review of the Registers of Scotland Executive Agency. [51918]

Mr. Dewar: In accordance with the Government's policy on periodic reviews of Executive Agencies, my Department will shortly commence a thorough review of the Registers of Scotland Executive Agency. The remit for this review will be as follows:

to carry out a prior options review of the Registers of Scotland in accordance with Cabinet Office (OPS) guidance and the agreed timetable, by

(a) re-examining the status options considered before the Agency was created, in the light of experience and of any changes in internal or external circumstances;

(b) testing rigorously whether the Agency function is required at all, and the scope for privatising, contracting-out (which could include market testing), transferring the functions to another body, continuation of Agency status or transferring the functions to The Scottish Office;

(c) consulting widely among the key players in the Agency (management and staff) and The Scottish Office, as well as customers, other interested bodies and other suppliers of similar services;

(d) assessing each option in terms of practicability and value for money; and

(e) making recommendations accordingly to the Secretary of State for Scotland.

In order to help ensure that all options are considered fully, comments from interested parties will be welcome. Comments should be sent by 30 September 1998 to the address below. The results of the Review will be published in late Spring or early Summer.

Mrs. E. J. Lugton
Civil Law and Legal Aid Division
The Scottish Office Home Department
V1 Spur
Saughton House
Broomhouse Drive
Edinburgh EH11 3XD.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the numbers of pupils assisted under the assisted places scheme in the 1997–98 school session by their area of residence on a parliamentary constituency basis. [51919]

Mr. Wilson: The information requested is shown in the table.

The Assisted Places Scheme Number of pupils by stage and area of residence, September 1997

	Primary/ preparatory education	Secondary education	Total
Scotland	570	3,265	3,835
Aberdeen Central	6	24	30
Aberdeen North	*	29	*
Aberdeen South	*	40	*
Airdrie & Shotts	*	18	*
Angus	8	46	54
Argyll & Bute	*	40	*
Ayr	7	19	26
Banff & Buchan	*	7	*
Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross	0	*	*
Carrick, Cumnock & Doon Valley	10	24	34
Central Fife	0	6	6
Clydebank & Milngavie	*	33	*
Clydesdale	*	16	*
Coatbridge & Chryston	6	19	25
Cumbernauld & Kilsyth	*	10	*
Cunninghame North	*	11	*
Cunninghame South	*	12	*
Dumbarton	21	89	110
Dumfries	*	*	6
Dundee East	17	65	82
Dundee West	9	47	56
Dunfermline East	*	11	*
Dunfermline West	*	26	*
East Kilbride	11	22	33
East Lothian	13	59	72
Eastwood	12	89	101
Edinburgh Central	34	151	185
Edinburgh East & Musselburgh	12	108	120
Edinburgh North & Leith	23	137	160
Edinburgh Pentlands	18	181	199
Edinburgh South	27	194	221
Edinburgh West	19	170	189
Falkirk East	0	16	16
Falkirk West	*	10	*
Galloway & Upper Nithsdale	0	16	16
Glasgow Anniesland	*	50	*
Glasgow Baillieston	*	14	*
Glasgow Cathcart	*	75	*
Glasgow Govan	12	131	143
Glasgow Kelvin	*	34	*
Glasgow Maryhill	*	29	*
Glasgow Pollock	5	45	50
Glasgow Rutherglen	0	30	30
Glasgow Shettleston	5	24	29
Glasgow Springburn	5	35	40
Gordon	*	9	*
Greenock & Inverclyde	0	8	8
Hamilton North & Bellshill	*	19	*
Hamilton South	5	14	19
Inverness East, Nairn & Lochaber	7	28	35
Kilmarnock & Loudoun	5	22	27
Kirkcaldy	*	5	*
Linlithgow	7	16	23
Livingston	10	37	47
Midlothian	7	48	55
Moray	5	8	13
Motherwell & Winshaw	0	*	*
North East Fife	17	58	75
North Tayside	28	65	93
Ochil	*	72	*
Orkney & Shetland	0	0	0
Paisley North	0	11	11
Paisley South	*	11	*
Perth	65	175	240
Ross, Skye & Inverness West	*	20	*
Roxburgh & Berwickshire	7	14	21
Stirling	*	23	*
Strathkelvin & Bearsden	8	57	65
Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale	9	19	28
West Aberdeenshire & Kincardine	5	27	32
West Renfrewshire	*	33	*
Western Isles	0	*	*
Outwith Scotland	*	56	*
Scottish Parliamentary Constituency unknown	36	187	223

Note:
Asterisks have been inserted to avoid disclosure

Local Government Finance

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the amount of money that each local authority in Scotland will be able to spend on non-housing capital for each year between 1998–99 and 2001–02 as a result of the abolition of the rule requiring local authorities to use 50 per cent. of non-housing capital receipts to redeem debt. [51670]

Mr. Macdonald: No estimate has been made at an individual local authority level because receipts raising ability varies throughout the country. At an all Scotland level we estimate that local authorities will be able to raise, on average, an additional £75 million per annum following the abolition of the debt redemption rules on non-housing capital.

Employment (Irvine)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next expects to visit Irvine to discuss local employment prospects. [49926]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend visited Irvine on 24 June. While no further visits have yet been arranged, he and I are fully aware of the economic problems in the town and we are keeping in close touch with developments.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Overseas Territories (Citizenships)

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to make an announcement on the issue of British citizenship for residents of overseas territories. [50943]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The Government are looking at the issue sympathetically, but more work needs to be done before any announcement

can be made. The results of this review will be made public in the forthcoming White Paper on the Overseas Territories.

East Timor

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning a possible phased withdrawal of Indonesian forces from East Timor. [51774]

Mr. Fatchett: Indonesian leaders have referred to the possibility of troop reductions in East Timor as a confidence-building measure in the context of the UN talks.

Foreign Policy Centre

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department has made any financial contribution to the Foreign Policy Centre since its establishment. [51791]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to provide no financial assistance to the Foreign Policy Centre. [51792]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has no plans to provide financial assistance to the Foreign Policy Centre.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what direct discussions his Department has had with the SPLA in Southern Sudan. [51772]

Mr. Fatchett: Officials keep in regular contact with the Sudan People's Liberation Army both in London and Nairobi.

I myself met representatives of the SPLM/A in The Hague on 18 June and in Nairobi on 14 July.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was first informed of the impending famine in Southern Sudan by *(a)* the Sudanese Government and *(b)* other sources. [51771]

Mr. Fatchett: We first saw predictions of severe problems in Bahr al Ghazhal in December 1997, with the release of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Crop Assessment and the draft UN Coordinated Appeal.

We can find no trace of any earlier warnings from the Government of Sudan.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review, if he will list the outdated premises referred to in the chapter on his Department. [51558]

Mr. Fatchett: There is no definitive list at present. The FCO intends to use the flexibility provided by the Comprehensive Spending Review to rationalise and modernise the estate, at home and overseas. We want to make key British missions overseas showcases for modern Britain.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review if he will list the assets worth £90 million referred to in the chapter on his Department. [51559]

Mr. Fatchett: There is no definitive list at present. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review the FCO now has the flexibility, during the next three years, to recycle up to £90 million gross receipts from the disposal of properties. We will use a series of indicators to measure the performance of all our assets and will use the results to rationalise our estate. Decisions to sell will be taken in the light of value for money considerations including local market conditions, prevailing exchange rates and the cost of reproviding alternate property.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review, if he will list the range of reforms and efficiency improvements referred to in the chapter on his Department. [51560]

Mr. Fatchett: The reforms and efficiency measures we shall be taking include:

- introduction of industry standard IT
- modernisation of the communications network including introduction of global e-mail
- rationalisation of the estate in UK and abroad
- brigading in-house service providers into a unified service organisation
- further devolution of financial resources
- modernisation of financial arrangements for Government Hospitality Fund and review of in-house hospitality and conference provision
- costs/benefits review of creating additional Business Units.

Parking Fines

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish figures recording the number of parking fines incurred by diplomatic missions and organisations in London during 1997. [51895]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: During 1997 the London diplomatic missions and organisations incurred a total of 2,480 unpaid parking fines. In 1996 the figure was 1,674. In April this year the Foreign and Commonwealth Office wrote to all diplomatic missions and organisations to give them an opportunity to pay off all outstanding parking tickets, or appeal to have the ticket cancelled. Since then payments totalling £84,665.00 have been received, compared with £48,640.00 in 1997. The table shows only missions which have 11 or more fines outstanding.

Unpaid parking fines

Position/Diplomatic mission	*1997*	*1996*
1 Turkey	97	45
2 Egypt	92	49
3 Oman	91	39
4 Indonesia	82	0
5 Kazakhstan	80	0
6 Cameroon	79	44
6 Cuba	79	40

Position/Diplomatic mission	Unpaid parking fines 1997	1996
8 Cyprus	76	33
9 Sudan	73	0
10 Nigeria	62	0
11 Ethiopia	61	10
11 Morocco	61	37
13 Jordan	59	36
13 Thailand	59	50
15 Brunei	58	14
16 Greece	56	13
17 Malaysia	52	71
18 India	50	43
19 Kenya	47	34
20 Angola	46	0
21 Hungary	44	40
22 Georgia	43	4
23 Russia	42	35
24 Afghanistan	37	18
24 Poland	37	18
26 Portugal	36	26
26 Zimbabwe	36	26
26 Albania	36	12
29 Iran	34	2
29 Tunisia	34	23
31 Bangladesh	32	62
32 Armenia	29	13
32 Tanzania	29	20
32 Algeria	29	21
35 Yemen	28	7
36 Ghana	27	47
36 Lithuania	27	10
38 Pakistan	26	61
39 Philippines	24	39
40 Cote d'Ivorie	23	7
40 Uganda	23	30
42 Mongolia	19	6
43 Spain	18	14
44 Romania	17	33
44 Germany	17	12
46 Qatar	16	42
46 Uzbekistan	16	9
48 Liberia	15	12
48 Luxembourg	15	3
48 USA	15	8
51 Italy	14	2
51 Nicaragua	14	2
53 Peru	13	13
54 Canada	12	7
54 Mauritius	12	11
56 Bulgaria	11	21
Total	2,260	1,274

Hong Kong

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to publish the third of the reports to Parliament on Hong Kong and the Implementation of the Joint Declaration. [51896]

Mr. Fatchett: The third report in this series, covering the period January-July 1998, was published today and a copy of the report has been placed in the Library. The report includes a foreword written by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. I commend the report to the House.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proportion of the sums, identified by the European Commission in document COM (98) 39 as being available for the information strategy for the euro in 1998, is planned to be spent in the UK. [49757]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The Government will continue to talk to the Commission about the scope for further help with our campaign for raising business awareness for 1 January 1999. However, there are no funds from the 1998 Prince budget specifically set aside for the United Kingdom.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many lecturers from the European Commission group Groupeuro have spoken in meetings in the United Kingdom; and what has been the cost to the EU budget; [49756]

(2) what was the total cost of printing and distributing the information pack InfEuro; [49760]

(3) what sums have been paid by the European Commission to the Association for the Monetary Union of Europe. [49759]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

These questions should be addressed to the European Commission.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Fund

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the outcome of the review of Social Fund provision for victims of disasters, with special reference to flood victims in Northampton. [51162]

Mr. Denham: We have now completed the review. It identified inconsistencies in the interpretation of current guidance. In particular, on some occasions, too little weight was given to the exceptional stress caused to families by natural disasters. As a result, we have issued a bulletin to Benefits Agency Social Fund staff today, giving advice on a more flexible interpretation of existing Secretary of State's guidance covering the conditions for award of community care grants. This advice will be put into effect immediately.

Persons whose applications have already been decided may, if they remain dissatisfied, seek a review, or a further review where a review has already taken place. Although the primary legislation governing the Social Fund is not being changed, and all awards will have to fall within Social Fund rules, we anticipate that this will improve the extent of help from the Social Fund given to all victims of disasters, including, of course, people affected by floods in Northampton.

Child Benefit (Payment Cards)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *640*, how many post offices have been paying child benefit by payment card for more than three months; and if she will estimate the savings which have accrued. [51499]

Mr. Field: All 204 post offices involved in the limited trial have been paying Child Benefit by Payment Card for more than three months. We estimate that the new system, which includes an Order Book Control Service, has, to date, achieved £1 million in fraud savings.

Correspondence

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when she will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Christchurch dated 27 April about overpayment of winter fuel rebates; [51494]

(2) when she will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Christchurch dated 20 March about winter fuel payments. [51493]

Mr. Field: Replies were sent to the hon. Member on 17 July 1998.

Residential Care (Liable Relative Payments)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many spouses whose partner has gone into residential or nursing care are currently required by *(a)* the Benefits Agency, broken down by region and *(b)* local authorities, broken down by authority to make a liable relative payment; [51507]

(2) if she will make available the guidance the Benefits Agency uses in order to decide whether to pursue a liable relative payment from a spouse whose partner has gone into residential or nursing care. [51506]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of Liable Relative Payments for benefit recipients is a matter Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Codling to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 20 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked Peter Mathison to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking how many spouses whose partner has gone into residential or nursing care are currently required by *(a)* the Benefits Agency broken down by region and *(b)* local authorities broken down by individual authority to make a liable relative payment; and if she will make available the guidance the Benefits Agency uses in order to decide whether to pursue a liable relative payment from a spouse whose partner has gone into residential or nursing care. As Mr. Mathison is on annual leave, I am replying.

The statistical information requested is not available. The Benefits Agency (BA) only maintain statistics relating to the number of cases where a liability has been determined and a contribution obtained. The statistics requested could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I am unable to comment on whether Local Authorities maintain statistics relating to contributions towards Community Care as this is a matter for the individual Local Authorities.

An issue of liability where a spouse has gone into a residential care or nursing home is considered in the same manner as any other case where there is a question of liability. The decision reached, within the existing legislation, will be dependent on the individual circumstances of the spouse who has not entered care. Factors such as the age, health and financial position are considered in all cases during the negotiation of maintenance payments.

The guidance concerning the issues to be considered when deciding whether to pursue a liable relative payment are not currently in the public domain. They are restricted under Paragraph 4(b) of the Code of Open Government Practice. As with other investigation guides, this is because whilst many liable relatives provide an accurate declaration of their circumstances to allow a balanced decision on whether they are in a position to contribute financially towards the maintenance of their spouse, the availability of this guidance has always been restricted to minimise the possibility of abuse.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Benefits Agency (Letters)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will review the clarity of language used in Benefits Agency letters sent to claimants. [50080]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 20 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if she will review the clarity of language used in Benefits Agency (BA) letters sent to claimants.

The BA has a commitment to producing documents in plain English.

In 1992 the Agency started to review the language used in 1,200 standard letters which are issued from its offices. The aim was to ensure that they are written in plain English. The exercise was completed in 1994.

The Agency has also produced the 'Letter Writer's Kit' which gives advice to staff on writing letters in plain English. This was issued in 1992 and is available to all staff.

The BA is aware that there is still room for improvement. In line with Active Modern Service, the BA is improving its information material, to make it more customer focused and accessible. Currently, this means making the contents of leaflets clearer and better signposted, targeting the information in a customer rather than a system led way and reducing the number of products overall. Shortly, the project aims to put systems in place to ensure that information is consistent across all information products and that staff give high quality advice and information. This will include improving the quality of letters issued to our customers.

The long term aim will be to sustain the improvements and build effective and appropriate electronic communications and information systems which remain customer focused.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Respite Care

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what criteria benefits agencies are required to follow when making payments of retirement pension and attendance allowance to those who are taking regular respite care; and if she will make a statement. [51426]

Mr. Denham: The administration of Retirement Pension and Attendance Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Codling to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 20 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked Peter Mathison to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what criteria benefits agencies are required to follow when making payments of retirement pension (RP) and attendance allowance (AA) to those who are taking regular respite care. As Mr. Mathison is on annual leave, I am replying.

The Benefits Agency is required to apply the legislation governing the payment of benefits to customers in respite care.

Payment of AA will not be affected by respite care unless the time spent in such care is greater than twenty eight days. If the first period spent in respite care is twenty eight days or less, AA will only be affected if the customer re-enters respite care during the following twenty eight days.

Periods spent in respite care not interrupted by a period of more than twenty eight days are added together. When the time spent in such care totals twenty eight days, AA is withdrawn from the next pay day unless those circumstances no longer apply.

Payment of RP will not be affected unless the time spent in respite care is greater than forty two days, after which time benefit is reduced. A further reduction is made after fifty two weeks in respite care.

If the first period spent in respite care is forty two days or less, RP will only be affected if the customer re-enters respite care during the following twenty eight days.

Periods spent in respite care not interrupted by a period of more than twenty eight days are added together. When the time spent in respite care adds up to twenty eight days, RP is reduced from the next pay day unless those circumstances no longer apply.

I hope that this is helpful.

Disabled Facilities

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much each London borough council spent in the provision of disabled facilities in homes in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98. [50904]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Expenditure on the provision of disabled facilities in residential care or nursing homes is not held centrally. Gross expenditure reported by local authority social services departments in 1996–97 on disability equipment for people in their own homes, and on adaptations to homes is set out in the table, for the City of London and London Boroughs. Further information on local authority personal social services expenditure in 1996–97 is available in the form of computer tables on the DH World Wide Web pages [Internet reference *http:\\www.open.gov.uk/doh/public/pss_stat.htm*] for all local authorities in England. Data for 1997–98 are not yet available.

The amount spent by London Borough housing departments on the provision of adaptations and disabled facilities mainly to owners and tenants in the private sector using Disabled Facilities Grants is estimated to have been £15.9 million in 1996–97 and £13.6 million in 1997–98. These estimates are based on data provided to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions which are however, incomplete. Information is not available on the amount spent by London Borough housing departments on the provision of adaptations and disabled facilities to council housing using their own capital resources.

Table: Local authority personal social services gross expenditure 1996–97: Adaptations to homes and disability equipment, adults

£000

London Boroughs and City of London	
Barking and Dagenham	1,157
Barnet	635
Bexley	493
Brent	601
Bromley	16
Camden	61
Croydon	382
Ealing	166
Enfield	264
Greenwich	612
Hackney	1,470
Hammersmith and Fulham	140
Haringey	337
Harrow	324
Havering	454
Hillingdon	526
Hounslow	164
Islington	76
Kensington and Chelsea	220
Kingston upon Thames	207
Lambeth	394
Lewisham	383
Merton	260
Newham	119
Redbridge	499
Richmond upon Thames	145
Southwark	843
Sutton	107
Tower Hamlets	389
Waltham Forest	234
Wandsworth	343
Westminster	701
City of London	16

Source:
RO3 return

TREASURY

Pensions Mis-selling

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 3 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *331*, on pensions mis-selling, what factors underlay his decision that the mis-selling of personal pensions was not a matter solely for the relevant regulatory body. [51581]

Mrs. Liddell: It is for the regulator to assess the extent of any mis-selling and to decide what, if any, corrective action is necessary.

Departmental Accountants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many accountants are employed in his Department. [51291]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* 25 staff currently employed by HM Treasury are full members or passed finalists for one of the Institutes in the Consultative Committee of Accountancy Bodies.

Marriage Certificates

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce legislation to require marriage certificates to include details of both parents of groom and bride; and what representations he has received from equal opportunities groups on this issue. [51471]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The Government propose to introduce legislation to phase in new marriage registers and reform the registration

services in England and Wales when Parliamentary time allows. A certificate is a certified copy of the entry in the register.

No representations have been received from equal opportunities groups on this matter.

Duty-free Sales

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what transitional measures he has put in place in respect of the abolished duty-free sales. [49973]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The nature of the duty paid regime which will operate following the abolition of intra-EU duty-free sales is under discussion at official level in the EU Excise Committee. Customs and Excise are consulting with UK trade interests to help inform the UK position. Once discussions at Community level are finalised Customs will work with the UK trade to address the necessary practical arrangements for implementation.

PEPs (Pensioners)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to exempt pensioners who do not currently pay tax from changes to arrangements for personal equity plans. [50671]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* Existing PEPs held at 5 April 1999 will continue to be free of income tax and capital gains tax after that date. Pensioners and others who currently pay no tax on investments held in PEPs will still pay no tax.

International Debt

Mr. Reed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list by country the amounts of *(a)* interest and *(b)* principal received by United Kingdom private banks, in each year since 1979, from (i) all developing countries that report under the Debtor reporting System of the World Bank, (ii) Afghanistan, (iii) Antigua and Barbuda, (iv) Bahrain, (v) Cuba, (vi) Gibraltar, (vii) Iraq, (viii) Kiribati, (ix) the Democratic Republic of Korea, (x) Libya, (xi) Namibia, (xii) Saudi Arabia and (xiii) Surinam. [51428]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The Government do not keep records of what UK private banks receive from their debtors.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list by country the amounts of debt relief given by the United Kingdom Government since 1979 to *(a)* each developing country which reports under the Debtor reporting System of the World Bank, *(b)* Afghanistan, *(c)* Antigua and Barbuda, *(d)* Bahrain, *(e)* Cuba, *(f)* Gibraltar, *(g)* Iraq, *(h)* Kiribati, *(i)* the Democratic Republic of Korea, *(j)* Libya, *(k)* Namibia, *(l)* Saudi Arabia and *(m)* Suriname. [51425]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* It would require disproportionate effort to list country by country the amount of debt relief—including debt reschedulings and debt reductions—that ECGD has given since 1979. However. ECGD has given debt write offs since Financial Year 1992/3. The tables shows the principal of debt written off since that date in £ millions. No other countries have received debt write offs from ECGD.

Country	*Total principal of debt forgiven since financial year 1992–3*
Benin	7.6
Bolivia	13
Burkina Faso	1.1
Egypt	171.2
Ethiopia	2.3
Mali	7.1
Guyana	72.3
Mauritania	0.5
Mozambique	0.8
Nicaragua	0.8
Niger	0.2
Poland	346.2
Senegal	0.3
Tanzania	37.4
Togo	4.2
Uganda	6.1
Vietnam	5.8
Yemen	6.3
Zambia	6.9

DFID has forgiven aid loans since 1978. All the debt write offs that they have given since 1979 are listed in £ millions.

Country	*Total aid loans forgiven (principal and interest) since 1979*
Afghanistan	1.0
Bangladesh	15.4
Barbados	0.2
Bolivia	0.1
Botswana	20.7
Central African Republic	2.3
Cote d'Ivoire	3.5
Dominica	6.6
Egypt	24.6
Ethiopia	2.5
Ghana	50.9
Grenada	3.3
Guyana	58.9
Honduras	5
India	'564.2
Indonesia	39.9
Jamaica	13.4
Jordan	50.1
Laos	0.03
Lesotho	0.4
Malawi	30.7
Mauritius	1.1
Mozambique	21.8
Nepal	2.0
Nicaragua	0.6
Pakistan	76
Peru	5.1
Senegal	1.1
Sierra Leone	10.4
Sri Lanka	25.2
St. Lucia	2.8
Sudan	9.9
Tanzania	3.4
The Gambia	5.15

Country	Total aid loans forgiven (principal and interest) since 1979
Tonga	0.5
Turks and Caicos Islands	1.9
Uganda	22.1
Western Samoa	0.2
Zambia	55.9
Zimbabwe	22.9

[1] In the case of India and equivalent amount of cost aid was granted instead of a normal operation

National Savings

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what performance targets have been set for National Savings for 1998–99. [51894]

Mrs. Liddell: National Savings has as its declared aim to add value by helping to reduce the costs to the taxpayer of Government borrowing and by supporting Government savings policies. This is supported by three objectives:

i) to market Government debt to retail investors so as to help minimise the combined cost and risk of the total National Debt and to contribute to the Government's funding needs

ii) to promote Government Savings policies amongst personal investors

iii) in meeting these objectives the Agency will operate cost-effectively and in a competitive and commercial manner without distorting the market[1].

During 1998–99 National Savings will be set the following challenging targets:

i) To work within the terms of the funding remit for 1998–99

ii) To improve the efficiency of customer transaction processes by 3 per cent.

iii) To achieve a 97 per cent. outturn against all NS published timeliness targets

iv) To achieve overall accuracy level of 97 per cent. of purchases and repayments

v) To show 95 per cent. of customers surveyed are satisfied or very satisfied with service provided by NS

vi) To complete the project to deliver Year 2000 compliant systems throughout NS by 31 December 1998

vii) To make a recommendation to the EST about the conclusion of the public-private-partnership project by 31 October 1998

viii) To develop arrangements for future provision of operational services accommodation that maximise value for money by 31 March 1999

ix) To maintain Investors in People accreditation covering at least 95 per cent. of workforce with substantial progress towards 100 per cent. coverage

x) To successfully conclude investigation and resolution of outstanding issues related to NAO report on financial reporting by 30 November 1998

[1] These are the aim and objectives revised as part of the CSR in June 1998. They are different to those set out in the Debt management report and NS Annual Report.

The funding remit sets out the costs and volume assumption that National Savings works to. The remit was published in the Debt Management report issued in March 1998, and has since been amended to reflect the Government's latest financial requirement, as set out in Annex 4B of the EFSR report, Cm 3978.

Working Families Tax Credit

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of the working families tax credit will count as public expenditure for the purpose of the spending totals announced in his Economic and Fiscal Strategy report 1998. [50129]

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what proportion of the expenditure on working families tax credit is included in social security expenditure as set out in page 167 of the Comprehensive Spending Review; [51247]

(2) how much he estimates the working families tax credit will cost in terms of *(a)* expenditure and *(b)* tax forgone in (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01 and (iii) 2001–02. [51426]

Mr. Darling *[holding answers 20 July 1998]:* Following existing national accounts conventions, the element of the Working Families Tax Credits (WFTC) payment that exceeds the tax paid by the individual taxpayer is treated as Government expenditure in Public Sector Current Expenditure, Annually Managed Expenditure, Total Managed Expenditure and General Government Expenditure. The balance is treated as tax forgone. This expenditure proportion is estimated to be 80 per cent. of the total cost of WFTC.

However, as the WFTC is to be part of the Income Tax system and will be paid by the Inland Revenue through the pay package as an Income Tax credit, the Government will, as stated in the *Financial Statement and Budget Report,* treat the whole of the WFTC payments, as Income Tax credits in the calculation of Net Taxes and Social Security Contributions.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report,* column *62,* (47484) what would be the circumstances in which a family with an income of £31,000 and above could receive Working Families Tax Credit; and what would be the highest possible income. [50880]

Dawn Primarolo: A family with two children and maximum eligible child care costs of £150 would still be receiving some WFTC with family income of £31,000. However, the highest possible level of family income which will be supplemented by the WFTC depends on the number, and age, of the children in the family. For example, if the family had five children under 11 rather than two, it would still receive some WFTC with family income of around £38,000.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the percentage of working families with children who will be eligible to receive *(a)* 70 per cent. and *(b)* some of their child care costs through the child care tax credit in the working families tax credit. [50582]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 1 April 1998, *Official Report,* columns *553–54.* The latest estimate of the cost of the child care tax credit in the WFTC is £200 million in 2000–01 (the first full year of the tax credit).

Landfill Tax

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will calculate the cost to public funds of diverting unclaimed tax credits from the landfill tax, not taken for environmental projects, to other environmental research. [50653]

Dawn Primarolo: Under the landfill tax environmental bodies credit scheme, registered persons who make contributions to approved environmental bodies may claim a credit of landfill tax of 90 per cent. of their contribution, up to a total of 20 per cent. of their annual landfill tax liability. If registered persons choose not to make contributions up to the maximum for which they can claim credit, there is no provision for the Government to allocate the unclaimed credit to other environmental research. The additional cost of such a scheme would vary according to the amount of unclaimed tax credit in any one year.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much Customs and Excise received from the landfill tax in the first year of its operation; and how much of the 20 per cent. reserved for environmental projects under the Environmental Trust was used for this purpose. [50650]

Dawn Primarolo: Persons registered for landfill tax may claim tax credits of 90 per cent. against contributions made to approved environmental bodies, up to a total of 20 per cent. of their annual tax liability, in each "contribution year". Contribution years are aligned with registered persons' landfill tax accounting periods, and do not necessarily coincide with the financial year. Credits claimed relating to the first contribution year amounted to £69 million. In the same period (1 October 1996 to 30 September 1997), total landfill tax revenue gross of claims to environmental bodies credits was £396 million, giving rise to a maximum credit that could have been claimed of £79 million. Therefore, some 77 per cent. of available credits were taken up.

Tobacco

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action HM Customs and Excise is taking to prevent the illegal import and sale of tobacco products. [50728]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs deploy anti-smuggling staff and specialist Excise Verification Officers to tackle, as a priority, the smuggling and onward sale of illicit excise goods, including tobacco products both at the frontier and inland. These officers are supported by specialist intelligence and investigation staff and work closely with other agencies such as the police and the Benefit Agency in dealing with offenders. Customs detections of illicit tobacco products increased from £17.7 million (duty evaded) in 1996–97 to £41.8 million in 1997–98.

Tougher policies on prosecution and restoration of seized vehicles of offenders were introduced in April. In addition the Comprehensive Spending Review has given additional funding to Customs to implement the recommendations of the Alcohol and Tobacco Fraud Review, which I asked Customs to undertake in consultation with the trade to consider how to tackle this serious problem. Further details of this will be published shortly.

Mr. Barron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue was raised from each of the taxes payable on each category of tobacco products in the last year for which figures are available. [51484]

Dawn Primarolo: The amount of revenue raised in the financial year 1997–98 for each of the taxes payable on each category of tobacco products were:

£ million

	Excise duty	*VAT*
Cigarettes	8,009.7	1,830
Cigars	139.8	135
Hand rolling tobacco	158.1	
Other smoking and chewing tobacco	48.4	

Notes:

1. Excise duty receipts are provisional.
2. Value Added Tax has been estimated from Office for National Statistics figures for consumers expenditure on cigarettes and other tobacco. No separate figures are available for the amount of VAT raised on cigars, hand rolling and other smoking and chewing tobacco.

Government Lending (Russia)

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the British Government's contribution to lending to the IMF under the General Arrangements to Borrow for the purpose of providing support to the Russian Government; and what effect such lending will have on the British Government's public accounts. [50922]

Mrs. Liddell: We welcome and support the agreement between the IMF and Russian Government to strengthen Russia's economy. As part of the agreement, Russia will reduce its budget deficit to 2.8 per cent. of GDP in 1999, reform its tax system, and deepen structural reforms in key areas such as corporate governance, the utilities and the banking sector. Russia will also restructure its debt, by converting part of its high-yielding treasury bill debt into lower interest rate dollar debt. Once Russia has fulfilled the necessary prior measures, we are ready to join other countries in providing the significant increase in funds that is needed, and to support the programme at the IMF Board meeting on 20 July. Russia's new fiscal and structural measures, the substantial new financial package, and the debt conversion scheme should significantly improve Russia's financial position and economic fundamentals.

The total financial package is worth $22.6 billion (at the current SDR exchange rate) in 1998 and 1999, of which $17.1 billion is new commitments. The IMF's share of the total is $15.1 billion. Of this, $8.4 billion is likely to be financed by activating the General Arrangements to Borrow (GAB), of which the UK's share is 10 per cent.

This loan to the IMF under the GAB is not public expenditure. It is a liquid asset that is guaranteed by the IMF. It earns interest at the SDR interest rate, which reflects market rates on prime financial instruments in

the five countries whose currencies are represented in the SDR basket (US, Germany, Japan, France and UK) weighted by their shares in the SDR basket.

A loan under the GAB would be issued out of the National Loans Fund and will score as part of the UK's official reserves.

Civil Servants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many civil servants in his Department *(a)* have a degree in science and *(b)* have held a position using that expertise. [50896]

Mrs. Liddell: Five civil servants in HM Treasury are recorded as having degrees in physics. No post in the Department specifically requires scientific expertise.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will seek to establish a co-ordinating committee for those EU members not participating in Stage Three of Economic and Monetary Union. [51265]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have no plans to establish a co-ordinating committee for those EU Member States not participating in Stage Three of Economic and Monetary Union. Under the terms of the Treaty, ECOFIN, which involves all Member States, is the primary decision making body on all economic and financial matters.

Earnings

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list for *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each of the Scottish unitary authorities, the average weekly earnings and weekly median earnings for (i) manual workers, (ii) non-manual workers and (iii) all workers; [50972]

(2) if he will list for *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each Scottish unitary authority and *(c)* Great Britain, the percentage of workers on adult rates of pay in part-time employment whose average hourly earnings (i) including and (ii) excluding overtime are less than (1) £4.61, (2) £6.15, (3) £6.60 and (4) average hourly earnings for (A) male manual, (B) male non-manual, (C) male, (D) female manual, (E) female non-manual, (F) female, (G) manual, (H) non-manual and (I) all workers; [50970]

(3) if he will list for *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* each Scottish unitary authority and *(c)* Great Britain the amount of average earnings in the (1) bottom and (2) top decile for (i) manual, (ii) non-manual and (iii) all workers; [50973]

(4) if he will list the average weekly earnings, *(a)* including and *(b)* excluding overtime, for part-time workers in (i) Scotland, (ii) each unitary local authority area in Scotland and (iii) Great Britain, broken down for (1) men and (2) women in (A) manual employment and (B) non-manual employment indicating the total figures for all workers. [50971]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Alasdair Morgan, dated 21 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary questions (50970, 50971, 50972 and 50973) on earnings in the Scottish unitary local authority areas, Scotland and Great Britain.

The information requested can only be provided at disproportionate cost. There is a considerable amount of data (from the New Earnings Survey 1997) available in the House of Commons library. This includes various distribution ranges of hourly earnings excluding overtime, by location. Areas covered range from parliamentary constituencies and local authority districts to Government Office regions and Great Britain.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Derbyshire currently earn less than the proposed national minimum wage, broken down by *(a)* gender, *(b)* age, *(c)* ethnic origin and *(d)* full or part-time employment. [51054]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Harry Barnes, dated 21 July 1998:

As the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the estimated number of people in Derbyshire who earn less than the proposed minimum wage.

The national minimum wage (NMW) will become effective in April 1999 and has been set at £3.60 for employees aged over 21. A development rate of £3.00 per hour will apply for employees aged 18 to 21. The proposals also include a provision for a rate of £3.20 which will apply to those over 21 years receiving accredited training during the first six months of a new job with a new employer, but we are unable to provide data on this. Workers aged 16 and 17 and all those on apprenticeships will be exempt.

The Low Pay Commission, in arriving at their recommendations, had to adjust 1999 pay rates to 1997 values. Their methodology produces £3.40 and £2.80 as the 1997 values of the government's preferred rates and I have provided supplementary data for these levels.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) does not collect information on the ethnic origin of employees, therefore figures for this element of the question cannot be given.

The preferred method for assessing the coverage of the proposed NMW is to present adjusted NES and Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for the number of employees earning less than the proposed NMW rates. This method adjusts for the fact that the NES is based on a one per cent. sample of employees in the PAYE system and is therefore likely to under-represent relatively low paid staff, earning below the tax-threshold, and in particular those who work part-time. It is not possible to use this method for small areas and, where available, data, solely from the NES have been provided in the attached tables.

The extent of the bias in the NES data may be estimated for the East Midlands by using the adjusted NES and LFS data for all employees. This suggests that the estimate of the overall proportion of full-time employees aged over 21 years earning below £3.60 could understate the true position by as much as 4 percentage points. However, because the bias has been estimated on the basis of all employees, it would be wise to treat this figure as broadly indicative rather than as a precise estimate for full-time employees.

Employees aged over 21 on adult rates, whose pay for the survey pay period was unaffected by absence

	Percentage with earnings less than £3.40	£3.60
Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	0.6	1.4
Part-time	' —	' —
All	0.8	1.6
Women		
Full-time	5.5	8.7
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
All		
Full-time	1.9	3.3
Part-time	' —	' —
All	3.4	5.5
Derbyshire excluding Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	2.4	2.8
Part-time	' —	' —
All	3.3	3.8
Women		
Full-time	5.3	7.2
Part-time	13.4	19.3
All	9.3	13.1
All		
Full-time	3.2	4.1
Part-time	14.6	20.3
All	5.9	7.9
Derbyshire including Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	1.8	2.4
Part-time	' —	' —
All	2.5	3.1
Women		
Full-time	5.3	7.7
Part-time	13.2	19.2
All	8.9	13.0
All		
Full-time	2.8	3.9
Part-time	14.1	19.8
All	5.1	7.2

Employees aged 18–21 on all rates of pay whose pay for the survey pay period was unaffected by absence

	Percentage with earnings less than £2.80	£3.00
Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
Women		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
All		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	5.9	5.9

Employees aged 18–21 on all rates of pay whose pay for the survey pay period was unaffected by absence

	Percentage with earnings less than £2.80	£3.00
Derbyshire excluding Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
Women		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
All		
Full-time	8.7	10.9
Part-time	' —	' —
All	8.5	10.2
Derbyshire including Derby Unitary Authority		
Men		
Full-time	8.5	10.6
Part-time	' —	' —
All	6.8	8.5
Women		
Full-time	' —	' —
Part-time	' —	' —
All	' —	' —
All		
Full-time	8.7	10.1
Part-time	' —	' —
All	7.5	8.6

' Denotes that a reliable estimate is not available

Source:

New Earnings Survey, April 1997 (GB)

Taxation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the average weekly payments for the tax year (1) 1996–97, (2) 1997–98 and (3) 1998–99 for (i) national insurance contributions and (ii) income tax for a single person on *(a)* 87 per cent., *(b)* 116 per cent. and *(c)* 174 per cent. of median gross male full-time earnings; [47110]

(2) if he will provide latest estimates of the average weekly payments for the tax year (1) 1996–97, (2) 1997–98 and (3) 1998–99 for (i) national insurance contributions and (ii) income tax for a married couple, male earning and female not earning, with two children, on total family earnings of each of *(a)* 87 per cent., *(b)* 116 per cent. and *(c)* 174 per cent. of median gross male full-time earnings; [47109]

(3) if he will provide latest estimates of the average weekly payments for the tax years (1) 1996–97, (2) 1997–98 and (3) 1998–99 for (i) national insurance contributions and (ii) income tax for a married couple, male earning and female not earning, with no children, on total family earnings of *(a)* 87 per cent., *(b)* 116 per cent. and *(c)* 174 per cent. of median gross male full-time earnings; [47111]

Dawn Primarolo: The data requested are given in the table. Changes in tax and NICs payments reflect earnings growth over the 2 years. The numbers do not include the working families tax credit and NICs changes announced in the Budget on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1097–1112.

Income Tax and NICs at percentages of gross median male full-time earnings of employees from employment

£ per week

Year		*Percentage of gross earnings*			
		87	*100*	*116*	*174*
Single person					
1996–97	Gross earnings	297.80	342.30	397.07	595.60
	Income tax	51.10	61.78	74.93	127.82
	Percentage	17.2	18.0	18.9	21.5
	NICs	24.9	29.35	34.83	40.62
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.8
1997–98	Gross earnings	311.98	358.60	415.98	623.96
	Income tax	51.50	62.22	75.42	130.79
	Percentage	16.5	17.4	18.1	21.0
	NICs	26.24	30.90	36.64	41.54
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.7
1998–99	Gross earnings	326.08	374.80	434.77	652.15
	Income tax	53.97	65.17	78.97	137.53
	Percentage	16.6	17.4	18.2	21.1
	NICs	27.49	32.36	38.36	43.38
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.7
Married, 1 earner no children					
Married, 1 earner 2 children					
1996–97	Gross earnings	297.80	342.30	397.07	595.60
	Income tax	45.93	56.61	69.76	122.65
	Percentage	15.4	16.5	17.6	20.6
	NICs	24.90	29.35	34.83	40.62
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.8
1997–98	Gross earnings	311.98	358.60	415.98	623.96
	Income tax	46.22	56.94	70.14	125.51
	Percentage	14.8	15.9	16.9	20.1
	NICs	26.24	30.90	36.64	41.54
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.7
1998–99	Gross earnings	326.08	374.80	434.77	652.15
	Income tax	48.49	59.69	73.49	132.05
	Percentage	14.9	15.9	16.9	20.2
	NICs	27.49	32.36	38.36	43.38
	Percentage	8.4	8.6	8.8	6.7

Note:
1. Income tax payments are calculated on the basis that the households receive no tax reliefs other than the standard allowances and have income only from employment. All earners are assumed to pay Class 1 national insurance contributions at the contract-in rate.
2. Earnings are based on £342.3 in 1996–97, £358.6 in 1997–98 and £374.8 in 1998–99.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to reply to the questions on direct taxes by household types tabled on 18 June 1998 by the hon. Member for Horsham. [51658]

Dawn Primarolo: I have done so today.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Telecommunications and Broadcasting (Convergence)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she plans to consult on the regulatory implications of the convergence of telecommunications and broadcasting. [51808]

Mrs. Beckett: I have today, in conjunction with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, published a Green Paper 'Regulating Communications: Approaching Convergence in the Information Age' (Command Paper 4022).

Gas and Electricity Charges

Mr. Breed: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to ensure that low-income consumers will benefit from the introduction of competition in the gas and electricity supply industries. [51747]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply gave him on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *402*.

Business Links

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to encourage a secondment scheme from private sector firms to Business Links. [50016]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* Many local Business Link partners have developed relationships with banks, accountants, and other professional bodies, which have resulted in successful local secondment arrangements.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to refocus the network of Business Links to offer specialised financial advice to small business. [50017]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The Business Link Service Guide already requires all Business Links to provide an impartial and independent "Financial Packaging Service" to small and medium businesses. This provides initial financial health checks and managed access to appropriate private sector providers of financial services. The key to all Business Link services is that they are tailored to the individual needs of the clients.

The Department is working closely with Business Links and others to continue to develop these services.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) of 2 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *19*, what proposals she has to reform the Business Links network to make it more responsive to the needs of small and medium businesses; and if she will make a statement. [50012]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* At the Business Link National Conference on 7 October 1997, I launched my strategy for enhancing Business Links, "A Vision for the 21st Century". It sets out an Agenda for Action which seeks to raise overall standards and bring all Business Links up to the level of the best. The Vision set out five key areas for improvement, including ensuring that they provide an appropriate service for all small and medium businesses.

Exports (China)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps the Government are taking to help British industry boost its exports to China. [50730]

Mrs. Roche: Following the designation of China as a priority market under the DTI's Export Initiative, an independent review was carried out of China trade promotion. I am placing a copy of the review in the Library of the House. The review's recommendations about strengthening the support provided to business by the DTI and the China Britain Trade Group are being considered. We intend, over the next few months, to upgrade significantly the quality of support and advice provided to ensure that British companies are in the strongest possible position to tackle this important and challenging market.

Companies House

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what impact the relocation of Companies House to Bloomsbury Street will have on the number of staff employed by the Insolvency Service at that site. [49969]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* I am advised that relocation of the London Search Room of Companies House, as a result of its lease expiring at City Road, will have no effect on the number of staff currently employed by The Insolvency Service at Bloomsbury Street.

ICL Pathway Project

Mr. Chope: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to her answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *640*, when, and for what reasons, the plans for an implementation date of 1999 for the ICL Pathway Project were changed; and if she will make a statement. [51496]

Mr. Ian McCartney: It was always expected that the original planning assumptions for this project would be tested and reviewed as the programme moved forward.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has for the future of the Pathway initiative for the electronic payment of social security benefits through sub-post offices. [50924]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My officials, together with those from the Department of Social Security and HM Treasury, are monitoring the progress of this important PFI project, as is normal with projects of this kind. The Post Office and the Benefits Agency continue to work closely with ICL Pathway to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

Car Prices

Mr. Cohen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps her Department has taken to establish the factors underlying differences in the retail price of identical models of new cars as between the United Kingdom and *(a)* other EU countries and *(b)* the USA; and if she will make a statement. [50857]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* Following an initiative by the Government at the meeting of the European Finance Ministers in March at York, the European Commission is carrying out an investigation in to prices disparities between different EU markets for a range of products and services, including cars. My Department is not currently undertaking a detailed investigation in relation to the USA.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many letters per day her office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50693]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*. Few if any staff in the Department are employed solely to answer correspondence: a large number of staff will do so as part of their normal duties.

Timber Industry

Mr. Gill: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the total amount of timber imported into the United Kingdom in each of the past 10 years by country of origin. [50814]

Mrs. Roche: Information on imports, on a country of origin basis, is not available. The table lists the main sources of UK imports of timber in each of the past ten years on a country of despatch basis.

UK imports of timber, 1988–1997

Country	*Thousand metric tonnes*
1988	
1 Canada	1,933
2 Sweden	930
3 Finland	698
4 Soviet Union	677
5 Portugal	504
Rest of the World	1,419
World	6,161
1989	
1 Canada	1,762
2 Sweden	873
3 Soviet Union	691
4 Finland	614
5 Portugal	470
Rest of the World	1,377
World	5,787
1990	
1 Canada	1,901
2 Sweden	696
3 Soviet Union	650
4 Finland	494
5 Portugal	463
Rest of the World	1,135
World	5,339
1991	
1 Canada	1,387
2 Sweden	712
3 Soviet Union	466
4 Finland	406
5 Portugal	286
Rest of the World	861
World	4,119
1992	
1 Canada	1,249
2 Sweden	953
3 Finland	487
4 Soviet Union	385
5 Portugal	254
Rest of the World	925
World	4,254
1993	
1 Sweden	1,483
2 Finland	703
3 Canada	430
4 Russia	366
5 Portugal	150
Rest of the World	936
World	4,069
1994	
1 Sweden	1,491
2 Finland	847
3 Russia	430
4 Canada	379
5 Latvia	343
Rest of the World	1,219
World	4,709
1995	
1 Sweden	979
2 Finland	420
3 Latvia	377
4 Canada	371
5 Irish Republic	303
Rest of the World	1,263
World	3,714
1996	
1 Sweden	1,315
2 Latvia	548
3 Finland	503
4 Irish Republic	462
5 Russia	269
Rest of the World	1,087
World	4,184
1997	
1 Sweden	1,264
2 Latvia	823
3 Finland	632
4 Irish Republic	357
5 Russia	275
Rest of the World	1,243
World	4,594

Note:
Timber is defined by headings 245.01, 246, 247 and 248 of the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC). Because of rounding, there may be slight discrepancies between the totals shown and the sums of the constituent parts.

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise

Sub-post Offices

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received from the Federation of Sub-Postmasters regarding the development of automated or electronic social security payments through sub-post offices. [51399]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The National Federation of Sub-Postmasters has made clear to my Department its strong support for the Horizon project and the introduction of the proposed Benefit Payment Card. The Federation believes that automation of the counters network is key to its future commercial success and to that of the Federation's members.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the impact on sub-post offices in rural areas of the introduction of electronic or automated social security payments through sub-post offices. [51397]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I am satisfied that automation of the Post Office Counters network, which will enable us to introduce a modern, fraud resistant means of paying social security benefits, will also assist the Post Office to secure a viable future for a nationwide network of post offices, to which we remain committed.

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had regarding the Pathway private finance initiative and its impact on sub-post offices. [51398]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have had a number of discussions with colleagues and other interested parties about this project which my officials, together with officials from the Department of Social Security and HM Treasury, are continuing to monitor closely.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what change there would be under her minimum wage proposals in the take-home pay of an employee currently on £3 an hour, working a 40 hour week and in receipt of housing benefit and working families tax credit, where the employee is the sole earner in a four person family. [47544]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 25 June 1998]:* The Working Families Tax Credit and the reforms to National Insurance Contributions announced in the Budget will substantially reduce the numbers of families facing very high marginal deduction rates—meaning families will keep more of any increase in their earnings. These reforms, together with the national minimum wage, will boost the returns from work for low paid workers and help to 'make work pay'.

It is not possible to estimate the change in net income in this instance, since that will depend on a number of factors, including: the age of the employee (and therefore the appropriate minimum wage rate applying); the rent they pay; whether they are in receipt of council tax benefit; the age of their children.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish an updated version of his 1998–99 cash expenditure plans as shown in Cm 3904 in the light of the publication of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and if, using the same format, he will publish equivalent data for the next two financial years. [51228]

Dr. John Cunningham: The Ministry's expenditure plans for 1998–99 are not affected by the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review which covers the three years from 1999–2000 to 2001–02. Outline plans for those years will be announced as soon as possible and will be set out in detail in the 1999 MAFF/Intervention Board Departmental Report.

Barn Owls

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he will take to protect barn owls in West Dorset against unintentional poisoning by pesticides. [51671]

Mr. Rooker: The risk to non-target plants and animals, including barn owls, is carefully evaluated before any pesticide is approved for use. Approval is granted only if the risk is sufficiently small, and users are required to follow strict instructions for use which are printed on every product's label.

The need to follow these instructions is emphasised in the Code of Practice for the Safe Use of Pesticides on Farms and Holdings (the "Green Code") which was comprehensively revised and re-issued on 26 March this year. The Code also provides specific advice on the precautions that should be taken to safeguard wildlife and the environment.

We run the Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme to monitor the impact of the use of agricultural pesticides. Anyone who believes that a wild animal has been unintentionally poisoned by pesticides should report the facts using the freephone number 0800 321 600 so that the incidents can be investigated.

Nobel House, Smith Square

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who is the present holder of the lease for Nobel House, Smith Square. [51221]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The lease for Nobel House is vested in the name of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions as is most other leased office accommodation occupied by Government Departments. However, responsibility for all matters connected with the Nobel House lease and management of the property has been devolved to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The landlords of the property are Prudential Property Management.

Turkeys

Mrs. May: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what specification governs the use of the terms traditional and free range when applied to turkeys; and to what extent these differ from the specification for the French term Label rouge. [50851]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The distinctions between free range and traditional free range as laid down in the EC Poultry Meat Marketing Regulations are as follows:

Minimum criteria	*Free range*	*Traditional free range*
Size of open air runs comprising of an area mainly covered in vegetation, and minimum access during lifetime.	Minimum of 4m² per turkey for at least half their lifetime	Minimum of 6m² per turkey from the age of 8 weeks
Minimum age at slaughter	70 days	140 days. The birds must be of a strain recognised as slow growing
Indoor stocking rate (liveweight per m²)	25 kg maximum	35 kg maximum. The poultry house may not contain more than 2,500 turkeys

We do not have any details of the voluntary *Label Rouge* term for turkeys but it is our understanding that the criteria may be based on traditional free range or the free-range total freedom term under the regulations. The minimum requirements for the latter term are the same as traditional free range but the birds must have continuous daytime access to open-air runs of an unlimited area.

Rural Affairs

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *499*, how many copies of his address, An Integrated Strategy for Rural Affairs, were circulated with the draft title Towards a Ministry of Rural Affairs. [50764]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* None.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from UK fishermen on the need for assistance in the installation of satellite monitoring equipment. [50542]

Mr. Morley: There have been a number of requests from the UK fishing industry for aid to be made available for the purchase and installation of satellite monitoring equipment on fishing vessels.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many staff and what financial resources were devoted by his Department to fisheries monitoring and protection in the past five years; and if he will estimate the financial resources in each year as a proportion of the overall value of fish landed in each year. [50545]

Mr. Morley: Information about the staff and financial resources devoted to fisheries enforcement and protection by the Ministry is set out in the following table.

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Number of staff (Fishery Inspectors and support staff)	120	122	126	120	114
Estimated cost of enforcement including aerial and surface surveillance	£9,840,670	£10,094,271	£10,655,624	£11,171,718	£10,837,647
Value of landings into England and Wales	£176,213,000	£181,630,000	£191,594,000	£188,674,000	£188,677,000
Expenditure on enforcement as a percentage of the overall value of landings	5.58	5.56	5.56	5.92	5.74

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49809]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Ministry is looking at ways of using Information Technology to improve the way we communicate, particularly with those who have business connections with the work of the Department. While we currently have no formal plans to switch to electronic communication with hon. Members and members of the public, our technology already allows anyone with access to the Internet to correspond electronically with the Department via e-mail.

A wide range of information on the work of the Ministry is available on the Department's internet website which can, of course, be accessed by hon. Members and members of the public. I also refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*.

Ritually Slaughtered Meat

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy that hind end ritually slaughtered meat should be labelled. [50334]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *152*.

Mink

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many mink were transported from the mink factory farm at Ponteland, Northumberland on 6 July; to what location they were transported; how long they spent on the lorry which transported them; and if they were given food and water during the trip. [49985]

Mr. Morley: The State Veterinary Service were aware of the movement of a number of mink to another licensed premises. Transportation of mink must be in accordance with the requirements of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 which, *inter alia*, lays down that animals such as mink must be suitably fed and watered at appropriate intervals throughout a journey. There is no legal requirement, either under the welfare legislation or the Mink Keeping Order 1997 for any such movements to be notified to the Ministry.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disability Rights Commission

Mrs. Heal: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to announce the Government's proposals for a Disability Rights Commission. [51840]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government are today publishing a White Paper entitled *Promoting Disabled People's Rights: Creating a Disability Rights Commission*

fit for the 21st Century, setting out their proposals on the role and functions of a Disability Rights Commission. This has been laid before the House and copies have been placed in the Vote Office.

In our manifesto we stated our support for

"comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people."

Accordingly, in October 1997 we announced that we would:

- set up a Task Force to report to the Government on how best to secure those rights;
- implement the remaining provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act; and
- establish a Disability Rights Commission.

The Disability Rights Task Force was set up in December 1997. The Government are very grateful to all the members of the Task Force whose recommendations on a Disability Rights Commission form the basis of this White Paper.

In June, we announced that we would be bringing in the provisions within the Disability Discrimination Act which will require service providers to make reasonable adjustments to make their services accessible to disabled customers in two main stages, in 1999 and 2004.

Our move to establish a Disability Rights Commission is another major step towards fulfilment of our commitment to comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people.

We envisage that the role and functions of the Disability Rights Commission will be broadly similar to those of the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality. Our proposals aim to take account of over twenty years of experience gained by equality Commissions here and abroad in combating discrimination. We want to create a Disability Rights Commission fit for the 21st century.

The Commission will make a large contribution to ending discrimination against disabled people and enabling them to play a full part in society. Discrimination against disabled people remains all too extensive and is totally unacceptable. The Commission will provide disabled people with support to sustain the rights which the law creates for them. It will promote conciliation and, where necessary, enforcement. But its role will also be to promote good practice and educate, and it will provide a central source of information and advice to employers and service providers to assist them in meeting their duties.

We emphasise that we expect that the Commission should not work in an adversarial or oppressive way. There need be no tension between the interests of disabled people and the interests of employers and service providers. The Commission should be seen as supportive of both disabled people and businesses alike. We are proposing that there should be a single Commission in Great Britain but with offices in Scotland and Wales. The Commission will comprise between 10 and 15 Commissioners. Their appointment will comply with the guidance issued by the Office of the Commissioner of Public Appointments.

The Commission must be credible with all stakeholders. The body of Commissioners between them will need to have sufficient diversity of experience to be able to take account of the interests of all disabled people and to reflect the interest of all key stakeholders, including those of small businesses. We intend that at all times a majority of the Commissioners should be disabled.

The Commission will be an independent executive non-departmental public body, subject to the formal management and reporting arrangements and accountabilities laid on such bodies.

The Commission's main duties will be to:

- work towards the elimination of discrimination against disabled people;
- promote the equalisation of opportunities for disabled people with those of non-disabled people;
- promote good practice; and
- advise the Government on the operation of the Disability Discrimination Act and other relevant existing legislation, and any future legislation dealing with discrimination against disabled people, and whether changes need to be made to it.

We will expect the Commission to work in partnership with other organisations and networks which have expertise relating to disability discrimination.

Within this framework of general duties, the Commission's specific functions will be to:

- provide a central source of information and advice, particularly to disabled people, business, and the public and voluntary sectors;
- assist individuals in securing their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act and other relevant domestic legislation, under any legislation resulting from the implementation of relevant European Union directives and under Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights which makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in the enjoyment of their rights under the Convention;
- prepare and review statutory codes of practice containing practical guidance on what is necessary to comply with legislation. The Commission will have a duty to publish a draft of any codes which it prepares for consultation;
- arrange for the provision of an independent conciliation service in respect of access to goods, facilities, services and premises and monitor the performance of that service. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) will continue to provide conciliation on employment issues.

The Commission will have also the power to undertake formal investigations. Such investigations would normally be reserved for serious and complex situations or issues. There will be adequate safeguards in place to ensure that the rights of those under investigation are not transgressed.

Finally, the Commission will be able to carry out research about issues that fall within its purview.

We believe that a Disability Rights Commission is essential in tackling discrimination against disabled people and promote an inclusive and just society. We invite comments on our White Paper by 16 October and will introduce legislation to establish the Commission as soon as the Parliamentary timetable allows.

Sixth Forms

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has commissioned to identify *(a)* the minimum and *(b)* the optimum size of sixth forms in schools for the purpose of (i) maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum and (ii) achieving economies of scale. [51144]

Dr. Howells: We have not directly commissioned any research. OFSTED have commented on the minimum number of students needed in a sixth form to provide economically a basic and broader curriculum, most recently in their report on Secondary Education 1993–97 and in more detail in the Effective Sixth Forms report published in 1996.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list each maintained 11 to 18 school with a sixth form of fewer than 150 pupils, grouped by local authority. [51145]

Mr. Byers: The 1997 Secondary School Performance Tables contain the number of pupils aged 16 and over (which gives an indication of the size of a school's sixth form) in each maintained 11 to 18 school in each LEA area in England. Copies of the tables are available in the Library.

Deaf People

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps are being taken to explain the benefits of life-long learning to deaf people; and if a video in sign language and sub-titled has been commissioned. [51143]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment published his proposals for the development of lifelong learning for all in the Green Paper, *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* (Cm 3790), on 25 February. We welcome comments on these proposals from all quarters, including deaf people and organisations which represent them, by 24 July, when the period for consultation closes. We will consider how best to explain further to all groups the benefits of lifelong learning, including the possible use of videos and other materials, in the light of the comments received and other advice.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if a financial contribution to individual learning accounts over and above the £150 from the TEC will be made available to deaf participants to cover the cost of communication support; and what will be the maximum amount available through any such funds to individuals with special needs. [51141]

Dr. Howells: We are currently consulting on the arrangements for individual learning accounts, which will be available to everyone including people with disabilities. The TEC contribution of £150 will be available for the first million accounts and will encourage individuals to take up learning. Some TECs already provide additional funds to help people who need extra assistance to access and benefit from training. There is no reason why this additional funding cannot be used in a learning account to contribute towards the provision of a communicator for deaf people.

Drug Education

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has *(a)* to introduce drug awareness lessons to students in primary schools and *(b)* to increase the time allocated for drug education in secondary schools; and if he will make a statement. [50926]

Ms Estelle Morris: Certain aspects of drug education are already a statutory requirement of the National Curriculum at all key stages, including the primary key stages. In support of the Government's recently published new 10 year anti-drugs strategy, the Department will be issuing further guidance on the provision of drug education to teachers, youth workers and other professionals later this year. The guidance will outline the vital role that primary schools can play in the very early stages of a child's school career in concentrating on the development of the skills they need to resist before they are drawn into experimentation.

Beyond the requirements of the National Curriculum, it is for individual schools to consider whether, and if so how, they might wish to extend provision for drug education. In addition, within the statutory framework, schools are free to decide for themselves how best to organise drug education for their pupils. We have set up an advisory group on Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) which will advise the Government on strengthening the place of PSHE in the curriculum. Drug education is an important part of PSHE. Our planned guidance will aim to encourage schools to extend their programmes of drug education and develop the approaches which best meet their local situation, taking note of best practice.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the future funding of drug education in secondary schools; and if he will make a statement. [50925]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department has made increased support of £7 million available to schools and the youth service this year, to assist primary and secondary schools and the youth service to deliver effective education about drugs. This builds on the £18 million of support made available through the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme in the three years since 1995–96.

We continue to attach great importance to the provision of effective drug education in all schools, and we will continue to work closely with other Government Departments in taking forward the work programme of the new UK anti-drugs strategy, in which education has a major focus, and where we are encouraging a more integrated approach to Personal, Social and Health Education in schools.

New Deal

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how rough sleepers will be *(a)* recruited to the New Deal and *(b)* helped off the streets by the New Deal. [51246]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Young people aged 18–24 who are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and are rough sleepers can choose to enter the New Deal Gateway early, before reaching six months unemployment. The New Deal Gateway includes help from specialist agencies to tackle problems associated with homelessness at the same time as young people are looking for work and, where appropriate, preparing to take a New Deal option.

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when statistics for the New Deal will be available on a constituency basis. [50840]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 17 July 1998]*: Figures for the New Deal Units of Delivery, reflecting the local partnerships who are delivering the New Deal, are placed in the Library each month. North Dorset constituency falls within the Dorset Unit of Delivery. The Employment Service District Manager in Weymouth and Yeovil, Neil Symons, is happy to discuss with you New Deal in the local area and your constituency.

The hon. Member may also find the Library research paper 'Unemployment by Constituency' published monthly, to be of interest.

Education Spending Statistics

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent per pupil in *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools in each local education authority in 1997–98. [51748]

Mr. Byers: Information on the expenditure per pupil in primary and secondary schools in England at the end of the financial year 1997–98 is not yet available centrally. It will be available when local education authorities publish their out-turn statements in the Autumn. I will write to the hon. Member in due course, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to integrate disabled children into mainstream schools; what resources have been made available to local education authorities under the Schools Access Initiative; and what guidance he has issued in respect of teacher training and retraining in relation to the needs of disabled children in mainstream schools. [51435]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 July 1998]*: The Green Paper "Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs" set out the Government's view that some children currently educated in special schools would benefit, educationally and socially, from being in mainstream schools, and consulted on priority measures to achieve this. We are considering responses to the Green Paper and expect to publish an action programme for special educational needs (SEN) after the school summer holidays. We have made available support totalling £11 million in financial year 1998–99, to local education authorities, the Funding Agency for Schools and voluntary aided school governing bodies, for projects under the Schools Access Initiative. Our national standards for the award of Qualified Teacher Status, in effect from May 1998, will mean that all newly qualified teachers will be capable of identifying children with SEN and able to differentiate teaching practice appropriately. The Green Paper consulted specifically on how we might raise, through in-service teacher training, the level of teachers' expertise in meeting SEN.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the advantages of educating children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. [51436]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 July 1998]*: The great majority of those commenting on the Green Paper "Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs" supported the principle of greater inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream schools, but emphasised the importance of ensuring that schools were properly equipped for this purpose. We shall take account of all responses, and of the findings of a research project we have commissioned to look at the relative costs and outcomes of different school placements for children with SEN, in drawing up our action programme for special educational needs.

Free School Meals

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of primary school children in Derbyshire are eligible for free school meals; and what was the figure in 1979. [51082]

Mr. Byers: Provisional figures show that 13.6 per cent. of pupils in maintained primary schools in the Derbyshire Local Education Authority area in January 1998 were known to be eligible for free school meals.

Figures for 1979 are not available centrally.

Nursery Grants

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to *(a)* review the operation of the nursery grants system and *(b)* replace yearly grants with termly grants; and if he will make a statement. [51632]

Ms Estelle Morris: Specific nursery education grant is paid to local education authorities and early education providers in the private and voluntary sectors termly, allocated on the basis of a termly headcount of the number of eligible four year olds educated at each setting named in an Early Years Development Plan. Every child is eligible for specific grant for three terms before they reach compulsory school age, irrespective of the age at which they are admitted to school.

From 1999 2000 we will be extending the specific grant arrangements to cover three year olds. We will be making £390 million available over three years, almost doubling the number of free places currently available for three year olds.

Independent Schools

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the charitable status of independent schools. [51564]

Mr. Byers: Just over one half of independent schools are charities. Decisions on charitable status for individual bodies are a matter for the Charity Commission within the framework of charity law. We have no plans for legislation to affect the charitable status of independent schools.

Civil Servants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many civil servants in his Department *(a)* have a degree in science and *(b)* have held a position using that expertise. [50893]

Dr. Howells: The number of civil servants in the DfEE whose staff records show either a Bachelor or Master of Science degree is 226. Information on whether they have held a position using that expertise can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49845]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Department is able to respond electronically to hon. Members although some hon. Members do not have electronic facilities. There is also some reluctance from some hon. Members to accept letters with an electronic signature. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*, concerning the variety of different methods being tested for the electronic handling of Written Parliamentary Questions.

With regard to communicating electronically with the public, there has been enormous progress. During 1997 the Department received 116,000 letters, and at least 11,000 of those were dealt with electronically. It is anticipated this will increase this year. Not only has the Department responded to inquiries electronically but it has for example, communicated electronically to consult with organisations on policy; deal with applications for work permits; handle requests for funding from the European Social fund and to liaise with Local Education Authorities.

The Department aims to be the flagship in the use of IT in the public sector and anticipates over the coming months that it will continue to expand its electronic communications facilities.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50681]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*, which sets out Departments' and Agencies' performance for 1997. Performance has been monitored against the Central Government service standards and the figures will be made available to the House shortly.

In response to the question on the number of staff employed to deal with the correspondence of the Department. Indeed most staff in the Department deal with correspondence as part of their normal duties.

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers have retired on the grounds of ill health in each six month period since 1995. [51164]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of teachers who have retired on the grounds of ill-health, from the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special sectors in England and Wales, in each six month period since 1995 are shown in the table.

Retirement date	*Ill-health retirements*
1 April 1995–30 September 1995	3,300
1 October 1995–31 March 1996	1,900
1 April 1996–30 September 1996	2,900
1 October 1996–31 March 1997	2,600
1 April 1997–30 September 1997	2,400
1 October 1997–31 March 1998	1,100
Total	14,200

HEALTH

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his latest estimate of the total cost to the NHS of ensuring millennium compliance in computer systems and other equipment. [47241]

Mr. Milburn: The National Health Service required health bodies to complete detailed project plans including budget estimates by 31 March 1998.

The returns submitted by health authorities and NHS trusts at the end of March 1998 put the overall cost of remedying Year 2000 problems at around £170 million for information technology and estates infrastructure, with a further £150 million required as a contingency to deal with non-compliant medical equipment (pending compliance information from suppliers).

Maternity Services

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will include in the Summer guidance on Consultation on Primary Care Groups a statement on how midwives will be included in consultations and subsequent local structures of primary care groups; [49175]

(2) what arrangements he intends to put in place to ensure that midwives are integrated into clinical governance arrangements for primary care groups; [49172]

(3) what arrangements he intends to put in place to ensure that primary care groups develop effective mechanisms for providing women's choice in NHS maternity services; [49174]

(4) what arrangements he intends to put in place to ensure that midwives can take on lead operational roles regarding maternity services in primary care groups; [49171]

(5) if he will issue advice to all health authorities and trusts that midwives should be included in consultations and subsequent local structures of primary care groups; [49176]

(6) what arrangements he intends to put in place to ensure that primary care groups develop effective mechanisms for quality assurance in NHS maternity services. [49173]

Mr. Milburn: Midwives will have important contributions to make to the functions of Primary Care Groups. Guidance on Primary Care Groups to be issued this summer will include advice to health authorities, National Health Service trusts and all involved in forming Primary Care Groups on how midwives will be included in consultations and subsequent local structures. The guidance will make clear that Primary Care Group tasks must be undertaken by those with the greatest knowledge and experience of the field concerned: midwives will clearly need to be involved in planning and providing maternity services. The principle of high-quality woman-centred maternity care is now embedded in mainstream maternity services, and midwives working with their Primary Care Groups will be well placed to pursue this. We have made it clear that we expect the principles of clinical governance to be applied in primary care as well as in the acute hospital sector; and that Primary Care Groups will need to demonstrate progress in this area as a condition of progressing to trust status. Clinical governance arrangements should involve all groups of staff engaged in the provision of clinical care.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* mechanisms and *(b)* legal requirements there are for (i) members of the public and (ii) representatives of organisations to speak at meetings of health trust boards. [48946]

Mr. Milburn: We have introduced a statutory requirement for trust board meetings to be open to anyone who wishes to attend. It is a matter of discretion for the trust chairman to decide whether members of the public or representatives of organisations are invited to speak at trust board meetings. All National Health Service trusts are additionally required to hold an annual public meeting at which members of the public may speak.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish mechanisms for residents within an area covered by a health trust to seek the removal of *(a)* the Chairman and *(b)* other non-executive members of the trust. [48949]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has the statutory authority to remove trust chairmen or non-executives from office if he determines that it is not in the interests of the health service that the individual involved should continue in post.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce local democratic accountability to health trusts in the communities which they serve; and if he will make a statement. [48948]

Mr. Milburn: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave on 28 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *140–41*.

Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many names were considered for the Chairmanship of the Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust when the post was filled *(a)* on the last occasion and *(b)* on the previous occasion; and when the current period of office ends. [48945]

Mr. Milburn: Prior to the chairmanship becoming vacant on 1 December 1997, only three potential candidates had been identified through national advertisement and nomination. To ensure a more competitive field the post was readvertised locally. In the interim period Professor Salmon was reappointed for three months. Following the readvertisement, 8 candidates were initially considered by a sifting panel as a result of which 2 candidates were interviewed for the post. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State subsequently accepted the recommendation of the regional chairman that Professor Michael Salmon should be reappointed from 1 March 1998 until 30 November 2001.

Riluzole

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health authorities currently prescribe the drug Riluzole for the treatment of motor neurone disease on the NHS. [51019]

Mr. Milburn: In 1997 Riluzole was prescribed by general practitioners in over 90 per cent. of health authorities. Information about Riluzole prescribed in hospitals is not available.

Consultants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total number of *(a)* cancer, *(b)* respiratory, *(c)* geriatric and *(d)* gastro-intestinal consultants in the NHS. [50918]

Mr. Milburn: The latest available information is shown in the table.

Hospital medical consultants in selected specialities England at 30 September 1996

	Number
Medical oncology	70
Diagnostic radiology	1,310
Radiotherapy	240
Morbid anatomy and histopathology	630
Respiratory medicine	270
Geriatric medicine	620
Gastroenterology	270

Notes:
1. Figures are whole-time equivalents rounded to the nearest 10
2. The census is a snapshot at 30 September each year

Source:
The Medical and Dental Workforce Census 30 September 1996

Cancer Services

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment his Department has made of the recent taxol trials in the United States of America; [50916]

(2) what guidelines his Department has issued to health authorities regarding new drug treatments for *(a)* cancer and *(b)* ovarian cancer. [50913]

Mr. Boateng: Some clinical trials on the place of "Taxol" in the treatment of ovarian cancer have already reported results but other are still underway. The latest results were presented at the meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology in May this year and have undergone close scrutiny by the profession. They will

shortly be discussed by the Standing Medical Advisory Committee and following that advice will be issued to the National Health Service.

Over the last two years the NHS Executive has produced three sets of guidance for commissioners in the "Improving Outcomes" series on breast cancer, colorectal cancer and lung cancer. Each gives advice on chemotherapy.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the five-year survival rates for *(a)* breast, *(b)* bowel and *(c)* lung cancer in (i) the United Kingdom and (ii) other EU countries. [50919]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Ian Gibson, dated 21 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on survival rates for cancer.

The latest available cancer survival estimates for England and Wales, Scotland and other countries in Europe are given in *Cancer survival in England and Wales: 1981 and 1989 registrations*, Monitor MB1 98/1, ONS/ICRF, 1998; *Cancer registration statistics Scotland, 1986–1995*, ISD Scotland, 1998; and *Survival of cancer patients in Europe—The EUROCARE Study*, IARC Scientific Publications No. 132, Lyons, 1995. Copies are available in the House of Commons Library.

Continence Services

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to issue new guidance for continence services. [51020]

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to issue national or draft guidance on continence services. [51580]

Mr. Milburn: I refer my hon. Friend and the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) on 7 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns *501–02*.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

Mr. Hill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to advertise for membership of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. [51965]

Ms Jowell: There will be a number of vacancies in membership of the authority later this year. We are considering how best to ensure that applications for these vacancies are invited from as wide a field of suitable people as possible. This will include advertising in the national press shortly. We also intend to maintain a list of potential candidates for vacancies that arise in future years.

Homelessness

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment his Department has made of the health risks faced by homeless people; [51085]

(2) what guidance he has issued to health practitioners concerning the treatment of homeless people; and if he will make a statement. [51084]

Mr. Boateng: We are well aware of the health needs of homeless people and have taken steps to identify the actions required to bring the health standards of the most disadvantaged up to those of the best. Last year we established an independent Inquiry into inequalities in health led by Sir Donald Acheson, former Chief Medical Officer to the Government, which is covering homelessness as one of many factors which need to be addressed. The Inquiry is due to report later this year.

The treatment of homeless people, like the treatment of others, is a clinical matter and as such is for the attending individual general medical practitioner or health practitioner to decide.

It is not necessary to have a permanent address to register with a general practitioner. The Department encourages permanent registration of homeless people wherever possible. Should any patient have difficulty in registering with a doctor, health authorities have the power to assign the patient to a GP. Where homeless people do not stay in any one area, they may still have access to GP services as temporary residents or on an "immediately necessary" basis.

The Social Exclusion Unit's report on rough sleeping, published on 7 July, announced that the Department will be sponsoring a research project to identify areas where rough sleepers and homeless people are having persistent problems gaining access to GPs. The report will be completed and published by summer 1999.

Scanners

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what statistics he collects on the provision of scanners within the NHS. [51095]

Ms Jowell: Statistics are not collected centrally on the provision of scanners in the National Health Service. However, we estimate that there are approximately 150 magnetic resonance imaging and 350 computed tomography scanners in the NHS.

Residential Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the number of people in residential and nursing homes who find that their capital has fallen below £16,000 before the responsible Social Services Department has completed an assessment; and what estimate he has made of the savings that accrue to local authorities as a result of not backdating in these cases; [51571]

(2) if he will make it his policy to require social services departments to backdate financial assistance for residential and nursing home placements to the date the person applied for an assessment or the date their capital reduced to £16,000 whichever is the sooner. [51570]

Mr. Boateng: The Department does not collect information on the number of people who are in residential and nursing homes who request back dating for financial assistance following an assessment of their care needs. We have no plans to introduce backdating provisions. The Community Care (Residential

Accommodation) Act 1998 which comes into force from 11 August clarifies the point at which local authorities should provide financial assistance. We will issue guidance to accompany the Act shortly that will clarify the responsibilities of local authorities for assessing people requiring residential care whose capital has reduced to the upper capital limit of £16,000.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the impact of his Department's guidance, LAC(98)8, on people in residential care who wish to fund a more expensive placement than the local authority would fully fund; [51573]

(2) what reasons his Department issued circular LAC(98)8 to replace the guidance set out in LAC(92)27. [51572]

Mr. Boateng: We issued the new guidance in Local Authority Circular (98)8 to clarify the fact that residents cannot choose more expensive accommodation than the local authority would normally expect to fund, unless a third party can contribute to the extra cost, because the previous guidance, LAC(92)27, was ambiguous on this point. The legal basis for this was set out in the consultation paper 'A New Partnership for Care in Old Age' in May 1996, which is that there is no provision under the National Assistance Act 1948 for a resident placed by a local authority to make up the difference between what the authority is prepared to pay and a home's charges out of their capital below £16,000. No information is collected centrally on the number of people wishing to fund more expensive placements.

Carers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, in drawing up the National Carers Strategy, he will make it his policy to ensure that the Government's commitment to family-friendly policies cover those who care for adults. [51763]

Mr. Boateng: The national strategy will address the concerns of informal carers of people of all ages.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role the reference group will play in the development of the National Carers Strategy; and when its membership and terms of reference will be published. [51762]

Mr. Boateng: We are looking at the detail of the consultative arrangements which will underpin the strategy and we are determined that all interested parties will be involved with the project as it progresses. Further details of the consultative arrangements will be announced in due course.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reasons underlie the differences between the guidance his Department issued concerning the boundaries of primary care groups and that issued by the Secretary of State for Wales. [51569]

Mr. Milburn: The respective guidance reflects the separate arrangements for Primary Care Groups in England and Local Health Groups in Wales. Configuration of the groups will reflect the different geographical and historical patterns of health care delivery in each country.

Medicines Act 1968

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *454*, concerning section 118 of the Medicines Act, what factors led him to conclude that the need for repeal or amendment of the section should be assessed after the introduction of freedom of information legislation. [51582]

Ms Jowell: The freedom of information White Paper outlines the Government's intention, where appropriate and consistent with European Union law, to repeal or amend the statutory bars to disclosure of information first identified in the 1993 Open Government White Paper (Cm 2290) and bring them into line with the harm and public interest tests. Section 118 of the Medicines Act 1968 is one of a number of pieces of legislation currently under review.

Chiropody Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to issue national or draft guidance in respect of chiropody services. [51574]

Mr. Boateng: We have no plans at present to issue central guidance in respect of chiropody services. Officials are currently looking at ways in which the National Health Service Executive might support developments in NHS chiropody services. This work is in its early stages.

Correspondence

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Christchurch dated 12 June concerning cystic fibrosis; [51492]

(2) when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Christchurch dated 1 June about prescription costs. [51495]

Mr. Milburn: I replied to the hon. Member on 20 July 1998.

Organophosphates

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has commissioned to study the effect on humans of simultaneous exposure to organophosphates, carbonate and synthetic pyrethroid pesticides at low levels; and what conclusions were reached. [50912]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

The regulatory process does make allowance for combination effects. In particular, when pesticides contain more than one active substance, the potential interactions of these substances are considered and approval is not granted unless these are acceptable. In addition, substantial margins are provided by the use of uncertainty factors in deriving acceptable exposures for individual pesticides.

The Advisory Committee on Pesticides has begun a review of all approved organophosphate and carbamate pesticide active substances. This review will consider the possibility of combination effects between the different substances, and the need for further research will be considered in the light of those findings.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 22 July 1998

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many letters per day his Department receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50685]

Mr. Hoon: Few staff are solely employed to handle correspondence, and for most staff this is part of their normal duties. In respect of his other queries, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Assembly

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the estimated timetable for the appointment of Ministers of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the transfer of responsibilities from her Department. [50404]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) were elected as First Minister designate and Deputy First Minister designate of the New Northern Ireland Assembly at its first meeting, on 1 July. I expect the rest of the Shadow Executive Committee to be appointed by the autumn. A Bill to enable the transfer of legislative and Executive authority to the Assembly and to Northern Ireland Ministers is currently before Parliament. Subject to that, and to progress on other aspects of the Belfast Agreement, I would expect the transfer of powers to take place during the first quarter of 1999.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many letters per day her office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50694]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*, by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary at the Office of Public Service.

With regards to the question of how many staff are employed to answer such letters, I can advise that this would be part of the normal duties of most staff and that few are solely employed to handle correspondence.

Class Sizes

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the average primary school class size *(a)* by school and *(b)* by education and library board, in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. [50729]

Mr. Worthington: I shall write to the hon. Member on *(a)* and place a copy of the letter in the Library. The information on *(b)* is as follows:

Average primary school class size

Education and Library Board	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Belfast	25.4	25.2	25.0	24.9	24.7
Western	23.9	23.9	23.9	23.8	22.9
North-Eastern	24.7	24.4	24.4	24.5	23.8
South-Eastern	24.0	23.9	24.2	24.5	24.8
Southern	23.5	23.4	23.2	23.3	23.0

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the average class size for pupils in Key Stage 1 in primary schools in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years, by Education and Library Board. [50755]

Mr. Worthington: The information is available only for 1997–98.

Education and Library Board	*Average class size for Key Stage 1*
Belfast	24.2
Western	22.0
North-Eastern	23.3
South-Eastern	24.3
Southern	21.8

Social Security Spending

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will estimate the amount by which DHSS spending in Northern Ireland would increase in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01, *(c)* 2001–02 and *(d)* 2002–03 if the real annual rate of increase were the same as the average rate of increase over the period 1978–79 to 1997–98. [51024]

Mr. Worthington: If the real annual rate of increase were the same as the average rate of increase over the period 1978–79 to 1997–98, DHSS would get, in 1999–2000, an extra £316 million, in 2000–01, an extra £647 million, in 2001–02, an extra £999 million and in 2002–03, an extra £1,372 million, each compared to DHSS total net planned expenditure in 1998–99.

Income Support

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the policy of her Department towards income support applications from those currently involved in the Drumcree protest. [51220]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Responsibility for the subject has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under it's Chief Executive, Mr. Chris Thompson, and I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Chris Thompson to Mr. David Winnick dated 16 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question seeking information about the policy towards Income Support applications from those currently involved in the Drumcree protest.

An application received from a person involved in the Drumcree protest will be dealt with in the same way as any other benefit claim, that is, it will be assessed by an independent Adjudication Officer strictly in accordance with social security law and payment will be made only where there is valid entitlement.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

Prison Service

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the number of prison officers currently employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service. [51081]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* As at today's date there are 2,214 prison officers currently employed in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Power Generation

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the main sources of energy for power generation in Northern Ireland, indicating the percentage of the market supplied by each source. [51088]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* In 1997–98 the main sources of energy for power generation in Northern Ireland were natural gas (49.1 per cent), coal (45.0 per cent.) and heavy fuel oil (4.5 per cent.).

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49239]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:*

	DETR (Central)	*Agencies*	*Government Offices for the Regions*	*Ordnance Survey*
Vehicles:				
Owned	18	428	80	105
Leased	9(4 on loan)	136	0	138
Fuel type:				
Petrol	21	219	23	65
Diesel	6	346	57	178
Engine:				
under 1000cc	0	[1]23		
up to 1399cc	3	7	4	16
up to 1799cc	15	102	39	129
up to 2500cc	7	288	37	98
up to 3000cc	0	38	0	0
over 3000cc	2	6	0	0

	DETR (Central)	*Agencies*	*Government Offices for the Regions*	*Ordnance Survey*
Replacement:				
1998–1999:	4	46	(See notes)	59
1999–2000:	6	53		72
2000–2001:	3	30		62

[1] Motorcycles
[2] 5 LGV; 1 PCV

Notes:

Non Departmental Public Bodies

When providing cars for their staff, NDPBs are expected to take into account two overriding principles: concern for the environment and value for money. Guidance on these two principles has been given to NDPBs and, within these principles, NDPBs are free to manage the provision of cars in the way they consider best for the body. Information about cars owned or leased by NDPBs is not held centrally

Government Offices for the Regions

The cars held by the GORs are not automatically replaced but their replacement is considered by the three parent departments (Departments for the Environment, Transport and the Regions; Trade and Industry; Education and Employment) when the cars are more than 4 years old or more than 3 years old having already travelled more than 60,000 miles

Other bodies listed in the DETR National Asset Register

The Office of Water Services (OFWAT) has one leased vehicle, diesel, 1900cc, which is due for replacement in 2000–2001. Neither the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF) or the Office of the Rail Regulator (ORR) have owned or leased vehicles

I have placed a breakdown of the Department's vehicles in the Library.

Building Regulations

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce measures to enable individual local authorities to set their own level of fees for building regulations. [50881]

Mr. Raynsford: Draft regulations—"The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 1998"—were issued for consultation on 5 June. They are designed to devolve the charge setting process for building control functions to individual local authorities.

Responses to the consultation have been requested by 17 July. After I have considered these, I will decide whether it is appropriate to proceed to lay the regulations.

Bus Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by bus company the subsidy paid by London Transport for franchised bus services operated in the London area for each of the last five years. [51188]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested will take time to compile. I shall write to my hon. Friend and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Car Clocking

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions his Department has undertaken since 1 May 1997 to reduce the incidence of car clocking. [51177]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are keen to see better information made available to consumers. DETR and DVLA meet regularly with representatives of the

motor industry and the police to discuss this and other issues of concern to the motorist. In particular, as announced in the Integrated Transport White Paper published on 20 July, my right hon. Friend, the Deputy Prime Minister, has asked the DVLA to consider ways of introducing new services to help the motorist. These would include the provision of further information on second-hand vehicles.

Housing

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of local authority and housing association dwellings in Gloucestershire, by district, was earmarked for the elderly in the most recent five years for which records are available. [51128]

Mr. Raynsford: The available information on numbers of local authority and housing associations dwellings in the district councils of Gloucestershire as at 1 April, together with the percentages for use by the elderly, is as follows:

Local Authority

	Dwellings	
	Total number	*% for use by the elderly*
1997		
Cheltenham	5,967	9
Cotswold	0	0
Forest of Dean	4,357	28
Gloucester	5,715	18
Stroud	5,996	38
Tewkesbury	3,157	15
1996		
Cheltenham	6,058	11
Cotswold	4,397	27
Forest of Dean	4,434	27
Gloucester	5,712	18
Stroud	6,108	38
Tewkesbury	3,243	15
1995		
Cheltenham	6,124	13
Cotswold	4,509	26
Forest of Dean	4,485	27
Gloucester	5,776	18
Stroud	6,199	37
Tewkesbury	3,300	15
1994		
Cheltenham	6,192	13
Cotswold	4,623	25
Forest of Dean	4,623	26
Gloucester	5,887	18
Stroud	6,358	35
Tewkesbury	3,389	14
1993		
Cheltenham	6,281	13
Cotswold	4,748	28
Forest of Dean	4,739	25
Gloucester	5,897	18
Stroud	6,473	35
Tewkesbury	3,451	14

Source:
Annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP1) returns

Housing Association

	Self-contained units		*Bedspaces in shared accommodation*	
	Total	*% for the elderly*	*Total*	*% for the elderly in shared accommodation*
1997				
Cheltenham	1,329	17	322	28
Cotswold[1]	4,971	15	72	43
Forest of Dean	612	19	32	0
Gloucester	1,163	26	135	15
Stroud	739	23	160	34
Tewkesbury	877	11	17	0
1996				
Cheltenham	1,317	20	336	27
Cotswold	788	18	49	47
Forest of Dean	598	20	34	0
Gloucester	1,176	27	127	16
Stroud	713	22	116	41
Tewkesbury	1,061	9	21	0
1995[2]				
Cheltenham	1,167	24	319	21
Cotswold	713	27	44	55
Forest of Dean	566	24	23	0
Gloucester	1,008	28	121	8
Stroud	631	26	102	18
Tewkesbury	485	20	17	0
1994[2]				
Cheltenham	1,188	24	262	8
Cotswold	668	28	56	43
Forest of Dean	579	23	10	0
Gloucester	942	35	117	9
Stroud	547	30	117	35
Tewkesbury	474	28	52	0
1993				
Cheltenham	841	34	233	13
Cotswold	326	60	48	50
Forest of Dean	396	34	10	0
Gloucester	660	48	118	9
Stroud	316	53	106	32
Tewkesbury	250	53	17	0

[1] Includes 4,102 units transferred from Cotswold DC to a housing association on 28 February 1997
[2] Definition of dwellings designed for the elderly changed
Source:
Annual HAR10/1 returns

Council Tenants (Housing Benefit)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes in the subsidy arrangements for housing benefit for council tenants have been brought about as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review. [51510]

Mr. Raynsford: From 1999–2000, we propose to introduce a change to the system of rent rebate subsidy limitation to help authorities that rebate more than the average proportion of rental income from their own tenants. We will consult authorities on this proposed change in due course.

Driving Tests

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many car driving tests were conducted during the last five years for which figures are available. [51277]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The numbers of car driving tests conducted during the last five financial years are as follows:

Year	Number
1993–94	1,492,230
1994–95	1,504,605
1995–96	1,498,194
1996–97	1,553,675
1997–98	1,102,986

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce energy performance testing of buildings occupied by Government departments and to evaluate and publish their environmental performance. [51437]

Angela Eagle: As part of the continuing energy efficiency campaign on the Government estate, new benchmark targets are being developed to be based on the standard of the top quartile of buildings of a particular type, such as naturally-ventilated offices. These will be settled once pilot studies have been completed. The reporting of environmental performance will be further considered by Ministers in the light of the recent report of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Pollution (Fines)

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy towards levels of fines for companies that persistently pollute the environment; what discussions he has had with *(a)* other Government Departments and *(b)* outside bodies about the advantages of imposing higher fines on such companies; and if he will make a statement. [51634]

Mr. Meacher: The Courts are independent of the Government, and it is for them to exercise their discretion in sentencing. It is up to them to ensure that the penalties they impose on conviction fully reflect the gravity of offences which damage the environment, and the seriousness with which society views them. The maximum penalties fixed by Parliament are there to be used in appropriate cases. People who blatantly or persistently damage or risk damaging the environment, and who show little or no regard for the law, need to be stopped. My Department has had discussions with officials of the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Judicial Studies Board about fines imposed for environmental and certain other offences, and will be meeting the Magistrates' Association.

Unified Business Rate

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a breakdown by collecting authority of the money collected under the unified business rate; and how it was redistributed via Government grant for each of the last three years. [51315]

Ms Armstrong: I have today placed in the Library of the House a table showing the amounts calculated by billing authorities as their final contributions to the non-domestic rates pool for 1996–97, and their calculations of the provisional contributions for 1997–98 and 1998–99. I have also placed a table showing the amounts of redistributed non-domestic rates payable to each receiving authority in England for 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99.

The two tables cannot be compared directly because (i) contributions to the non-domestic rates pool are made by billing authorities—for example London boroughs and district councils, whereas redistributed non-domestic rates are paid to all receiving authorities (including preceptors such as county councils and police authorities); (ii) the total redistributed from the pool includes amounts other than those received from billing authorities—that is payments in lieu of rates from Crown properties, payments from properties on the Central List, and Exchequer contributions to compensate the pool for income foregone as a result of transitional schemes.

Vehicle Registration Plates

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received with regard to spacing in the new format of vehicle registration plates; and if he will make a statement. [51583]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department has received a number of representations from one number plate manufacturer expressing concern about the proposed spacing of characters in the new vehicle registration format. As explained in the answer I have to the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) on 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *470*, the Department will be considering these detailed aspects as part of its further research into the memorability of the new format.

NHS Employees

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many reports under the reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1985 were received each year since 1991 in respect of NHS employees in Wales. [51585]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to her question on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *323–24*.

Integrated Transport White Paper

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will allow local authorities an extension of the time allowed for them to submit their transport policies and programme bids for 1999–2000 to enable them to take account of the contents of the Integrated Transport White Paper. [52152]

Dr. Strang: The guidance we issued to local authorities in April on the submission of their bids is consistent with the main messages in the White Paper. If authorities wish to take some time to ensure that their TPPs reflect those messages they will not be penalised. Under the TPP procedures they are always allowed a period in which to amend their TPPs. This year authorities have until 10 October to make changes to their bids.

Environmental Protection

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish details of his public expenditure plans for his Department's environmental protection programmes. [52015]

Mr. Meacher: Yes. I am today publishing details of the provision for my environmental protection programmes, as agreed in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review. In addition to the extra £174 million for energy efficiency announced by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, provision for my other environmental protection programmes is being increased by £80 million over the next three years.

£150 million of the new energy efficiency money is added to the existing £75 million a year expenditure on the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme creating a new expanded fuel poverty programme to help another 1,000,000 vulnerable households whose homes cannot be heated to the minimum level for good health.

Support for the Energy Saving Trust is increased from £19 million this year, to £22 million for 1999–2000, and to £25 million for each of the later years. An extra £1.5 million is provided for Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme in 1999–2000 and further increases are planned to provide, among other things, new programmes of advice to businesses to help improve energy efficiency.

The extra £80 million for environmental protection will enable me to:

(a) make £50 million available to local authorities to support implementation of the new provisions for contaminated land in Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (inserted by Section 57 of the Environment Act 1995), which we intend to bring into force in July 1999. The funds will support local authorities in developing inspection strategies, carrying out investigations of individual sites and taking forward necessary enforcement action; and

(b) increase grant to the Environment Agency by a total of £13 million over three years to help implement new European Directives, and to support the Agency's role in the new contaminated land regime; and

(c) increase funding for environmental research, for a number of small programmes which promote environmental improvements and for pneumoconiosis compensation grant.

Details are set out in the table.

DETR environmental protection programmes—actual and planned resource provision 1998–99 to 2001–02

£ million

Programmes	*Actual provision 1998–99*	*Planned provision 1999–2000*	*Planned provision 2000–01*	*Planned provision 2001–02*
Energy Efficiency				
Home Energy Efficiency Scheme	75.1	75.1	125.1	175.1
Energy Efficiency Best Practice	15.1	16.7	19.8	22.5
Energy Savings Trust	19.0	22.0	25.0	25.0
Sub-total Energy Efficiency	109.2	113.8	169.9	222.6
Contaminated Land				
Implementation of S57 by Local Authorities	—	14.0	18.0	18.0
Capital Funding for Local Authorities	14.0	15.0	15.0	15.0
Sub-total Contaminated Land	14.0	29.0	33.0	33.0
Environment Agency	100.9	106.1	106.0	103.4
Small Programmes Promoting Environmental Improvement (national)[1]	15.6	18.5	18.5	18.5
Programmes Promoting environmental improvement through international co-operation[2]	10.6	12.9	12.9	12.9
Environmental Research	28.3	29.8	29.8	29.8
Other environmental monitoring[3]	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8
Grants towards mains water supply and sewerage in rural areas etc.	6.2	6.2	5.5	5.4
Air quality, smoke control and other capital programmes[4]	5.9	4.6	3.1	3.1
Pneumoconiosis Compensation grant[5]	6.9	7.7	7.7	7.7

[1] Includes: Environmental Technology Best Practice, Tidy Britain, Going for Green, Environmental Action Fund, UKEB, Environmental Publicity and Mersey Basin Foundation

[2] Includes: Darwin, UNEP, East European Environmental know-how fund, Chernobyl Sarcophagus and other international subscriptions for 2000/1 and beyond. For 1998/99 excludes provision for Know-How and Chernobyl following transfers

[3] Includes: Radon Measurement, NETCEN and Met Office Emergency Pollution Response (part of the Radio-Active incident monitoring Network (RIMNET)

[4] Includes: Provision for supplementary credit approvals for Air Quality and Smoke Control, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and the Isles' of Scilly

[5] Pneumoconiosis compensation grant is administered by the Health and Safety Executive

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Commission Office, London

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a list of awards granted by the European Commission Office in London to organisations promoting the concept of Europe. [49644]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We are not aware of any awards by the European Commission Office in London to organisations promoting the concept of Europe. The

relevant budget lines—established by the Council and the European Parliament—are administered by the Commission headquarters in Brussels.

Cayman Islands

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will introduce measures to enable residents of the Cayman Islands to have the same freedom of movement throughout the European Union as is available to citizens of French and Dutch overseas territories; and if he will make a statement. [51553]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The possibility of granting citizenship to the citizens of the Overseas Territories, thereby conferring on them freedom of movement throughout the European Union, is under active discussion between all Departments involved. We are looking at the issue sympathetically, but more work needs to be done before any announcement can be made. The result of this review will be made public in the forthcoming White Paper on the Overseas Territories.

Police and Military Forces (Support)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 21 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns *520–22*, on support for the police and military forces, if he will provide a breakdown of the expenditure in 1997–98 under the United Kingdom military training assistance scheme in support of the armed forces in Sri Lanka; and if he will list the training establishments involved and the nature of the training. [51801]

Mr. Fatchett: In 1997–98 the United Kingdom Military Training Assistance Scheme was used to fund the following military training for the Sri Lankan armed forces:

Military officers sent on UK training courses at Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst and the Royal College of Defence Studies (£27,741).

Assistance in setting up and running an Army Staff College (£54,645) aimed at middle ranking officers.

Advisory visit (£4,535) by military instructors to assess the suitability of the Sri Lankan Armed Command Regiment to receive VIP protection assistance.

Drill training (£1,085) for the Sri Lankan Army in preparation for the 50th Anniversary of Independence Parades.

Once adjustments made by the MOD billing agency in Liverpool have been added (£2,210) this brings the total to £90,216.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49806]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Department currently has only a limited facility for the handling of correspondence from hon. Members and members of the public on stand-alone work stations. There is a limited e-mail facility on the Department's main Information Technology Network.

The Department is putting plans in place to connect selected parts of the office to the Government Secure Internet (GSI) at the end of 1998, followed by full interconnection between the core network and the GSI in the first half of 1999. That will enable a full e-mail between the office, Members of both Houses and members of the public.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50680]

Mr. Straw: On the targets, performance and volume of letters I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

It is not possible to say how many staff are involved in answering correspondence in my Department because it is part of the normal duties of a large number of them.

Elmley Prison

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the chemicals used for *(a)* gardening and *(b)* farming at Elmley Prison, Eastchurch, Isle of Sheppey. [50481]

Ms Quin: The following five commercial chemical products are used in gardening at Elmley prison: Casoron G; Mosstox; Roundup Biactive; Supertox 30; and Trik. These products are used for the control of weeds and moss within the prison perimeter wall as flower and shrub beds, lawns and paths, and the base of the perimeter fence. Most of these products are used on an annual basis and in relatively small quantities. There is no farming conducted at Elmley.

All three Isle of Sheppey prisons have a "good neighbour policy", and would be happy to discuss any environmental issues with interested parties.

Probation Service

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that the Probation Service provides an equal level of service in urban and rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [51028]

Ms Quin: The funding formula used by the Home Office to allocate specific current grant to each of the 54 English and Welsh probation services takes account of demographic factors, including the sparsity of population. The formula is now subject to review, in consultation with the Association of Chief Probation Officers, Central Probation Council and the Local Government Association. Once the allocation has been made, it is for the responsible probation committee in each area to decide how its service's budget should be spent.

Fire Service

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of

the cost-effectiveness of national use of virtual reality simulations for operational command training in the fire service; [50900]

(2) what assessement he has made of the national requirements for operational command training in the fire service; [50902]

(3) what assessment he has made of national trials of virtual reality operational command training in the fire service. [50901]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson), on 21 July 1998. *Official Report*, columns *435–36*.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the London Fire Service has spent on the services of lobbying companies in *(a)* the last and *(b)* the current financial year; and which companies have been engaged. [51467]

Mr. George Howarth: I understand from the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority that they spent £11,326 on the services of a Parliamentary Adviser in 1997–98, and have spent £4,659 on such services in the current financial year. The services are provided by GJW Government Relations Limited.

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will refer the issue of lenient sentences for road traffic offences to the new Sentencing Advisory Council. [51407]

Mr. Michael: The Court of Appeal has already established detailed sentencing guidelines for serious road traffic offences, in the cases of R. *v.* Boswell (1984) and AG Ref. 14 and 24 of 1993. Once the new Sentencing Advisory Panel has been established, we will consider whether there are particular categories of offences which should be referred to it and with what degree of priority.

Police Numbers

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number and rank of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian staff employed in the administration support units of (i) the Metropolitan Police and (ii) each other police force in England and Wales. [51468]

Mr. Michael: The information collected annually by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary on the numbers of police and civilian staff deployed to various duties is not at a level which allows the identification of the number or rank of staff assigned to Administration Support Units. This information could be obtained from the 43 forces only at disproportionate cost.

Election Candidates

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the article in Council Magazine by Julian Malins QC on candidates at general elections. [51485]

Mr. George Howarth: The article by the hon. Member's brother gives a useful account of the problem of misleading candidates' descriptions on ballot papers. Since the article was written, the Registration of Political Parties Bill has been introduced. The Bill provides that only a candidate authorised by a registered political party may include a description on the ballot paper which is likely to lead voters to associate the candidate with that party. It also enables candidates representing registered parties to include the party's emblem on the ballot paper.

Sentences

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about provisions contained in the Crime and Disorder Bill [*Lords*] relating to maximum sentences in magistrates' courts. [49901]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* There are no provisions in the Crime and Disorder Bill [*Lords*] to change the current maximum sentences available to the magistrates' courts (six months custody for a single offence or 24 months in a Secure Training Centre for 12–14 year olds). The new Detention and Training Order (DTO) will enable magistrates to impose a maximum custodial DTO sentence of 24 months for 12–17 year olds.

The Magistrates' Association have written to me on the question of increasing the general maximum penalty of six months available to the magistrates' courts. They have been invited to supply further information.

Mary Bell Case

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcome of the investigation into his officials' handling of the Mary Bell case. [52075]

Mr. Straw: I have now received the Permanent Secretary's report into the circumstances in which Home Office officials had for some time known of the possibility of a book from which Mary Bell would profit financially, but had not informed Ministers. This was, at my request, an investigation to identify lessons for the future, not a disciplinary inquiry.

Since her release in 1980, Mary Bell has remained under life licence under the supervision of the probation service. Throughout this period, officials in my Department's Lifer Review Unit have received regular reports from the probation officers responsible for her supervision. These have frequently included accounts of attempts by literary agents and the media to induce her for substantial sums to tell her story. Indeed, there are records of such approaches to her even before she left prison.

The probation service is responsible for supervising those subject to life licence and for reporting, on a regular basis, on each individual to the Lifer Unit on their progress. The service has a particular responsibility to ensure that the public is protected from people who have previously committed very serious offences. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Probation has received a copy of the report of the investigation carried out by the Chief Probation Officer of the Durham Probation Service into their handling of Mary Bell's case, and offered me his own independent assessment of it. In the light of this,

I am satisfied that the probation service kept my officials properly informed of the plans to publish a book. Given the exceptional difficulties of the case, it is also clear that the service has played a major and positive role in helping Mary Bell keep to the conditions of her licence in the 18 years since her release.

Between 1984 and 1987, my officials were informed that Mary Bell had become interested in producing her own account and had spent some time preparing a manuscript. The supervising probation officer notified them of discussions with a literary agent in 1985 about a possible autobiography. Officials advised the probation officer that the Home Office did not favour publication but had no power to prevent it and would not attempt to put pressure on Mary Bell. Ministers were not informed of these developments and, in the event, the project foundered. Officials heard no more about the possibility of a book until August 1995, when they were informed of her renewed interest in producing her own account.

The probation service notified officials in January 1996 that serious negotiations were under way between Mary Bell, Gitta Sereny and a literary agent. In July, there were informed that a contract had been signed and an advance payment made. Officials responded to these developments along the same lines as their predecessors more than a decade previously, namely by questioning the wisdom of the venture but confirming, correctly, that they had no power to prevent it. Great care was taken throughout to try to protect, through maintenance of an injunction long in force, the anonymity of Mary Bell and her family, in the interests of her young daughter.

Following a probation service letter of 6 March this year, advising that the book would appear shortly and was likely to arouse controversy, officials recognised the need to forewarn Ministers. Because their information was that serialisation of the book would not begin until 2 May they did not, in the event, do so until 23 April, by which time (unbeknown to them) news of the book was already emerging. The initial briefing to Ministers concentrated on the contents of the book, and did not make it clear that officials and the probation service had known about the contract from the outset. Ministers were given a full brief on the history of the case only on 30 April, the day after newspaper serialisation had started and some days after widespread controversy had arisen over the financial benefit to Mary Bell.

The Lifer Unit of the Prison Service Headquarters is responsible for casework on nearly 4,000 life sentence prisoners and around a further 800 lifers now on supervision under licence in the community. Their primary task is to ensure that the lifer system operates in a way which minimises risk to the public. They bear a heavy load and I am satisfied that I have been very well served—as, I believe, have my predecessors—by the conscientious advice they provide on the exercise of my statutory powers in individual cases. The possibility of financial benefit to Mary Bell for a book about her crimes did not involve questions of public risk or any breach of the law or the terms of her life licence. Officials accordingly concluded, as early as 1985, that there was nothing they could do to prevent it and did not therefore believe it necessary to submit to Ministers.

Ministers are entitled to expect that officials will try to spot events involving their cases which are likely to arouse controversy and provoke concern over the adequacy of the law. I believe that officials acted in this case throughout in good faith and in accordance with a correct interpretation of the law. With hindsight, it is clear that there were a number of occasions on which Ministers might reasonably have been informed of developments in the Mary Bell case. The Permanent Secretary has accordingly recommended to me procedural and other improvements which will help guide Home Office staff in assessing future cases where Ministers may need to be kept informed of developments, even where there is no question of the exercise by them of statutory powers. He and the Director General of the Prison Service are specifically preparing revised internal operating procedures for the handling of lifer cases and arranging for supplementary guidance to be provided to lifer caseworkers and supervising probation officers.

I have asked officials separately to consider whether the law relating to criminal memoirs might sensibly be strengthened.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary on Number 2 Area (North West) of the Metropolitan Police; [52076]

(2) if he will make a statement on the report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary on Number 1 Area (Central) of the Metropolitan Police. [52077]

Mr. Michael: Yes. I have today placed in the Library a note of the recommendations from the report, together with the Commissioner's response and the police authority responses, which take into account the advice my right hon. Friend and I have received from the Metropolitan Police Committee.

Prisoners

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the outcome of the review of arrangements for the release on temporary licence of prisoners. [52078]

Mr. Straw: Following a review initiated by the Director General of the Prison Service, I have decided to make a number of changes to the arrangements for release of prisoners on temporary licence, to support the Government's policy of developing constructive regimes for prisoners. The current system, put in place in 1995, has significantly reduced the numbers of temporary release failures, and the stringent risk assessment process will remain in place in order to ensure protection of the public. The Prisoners (Return to Custody) Act 1995 made it an offence to fail to return to custody after a period of temporary release. However, the current system places too great a limit on opportunities for governors to develop activities aimed at supporting constructive regimes and preparing prisoners for resettlement in the community.

From 1 September, governors will be able to develop challenging activities for young offenders outside the establishment, including schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Young offenders will be

allowed limited participation in team sports in the community, where they are able to represent the establishment and build local contacts. Many establishments already undertake reparational and community work, and overnight stays away from the establishment will be permitted for selected young offenders where this is necessary to support such projects.

A number of measures will assist prisoners in finding work or training on release and in maintaining family ties, factors central to reducing reoffending. Short-term young offenders will be eligible for release on facility licence for interviews to obtain housing or employment on release, and for hostel assessments. Prisoners aged 18–24 will be eligible for release on facility licence, including overnight stays where necessary, for employment related interviews under the Government's New Deal scheme. Further opportunities will be made available, for both adult prisoners and young offenders, to gain experience of employment prior to release. The current restrictions on prisoners obtaining paid work in the community will be amended to allow governors greater freedom to develop "working out" schemes, to allow prisoners experience of regular employment. Release on resettlement licence will also be extended for young offenders, once they have reached the latter stages of their sentences, to assist in their resettlement in the community.

Consideration will be given to extending some of these changes to all adult prisoners if the evaluation suggests it is safe to do so. These changes will be carefully evaluated.

A copy of the relevant Prison Service Instruction, giving full details of the changes, will be placed in the Library.

Asylum Seekers

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the instructions to Immigration and Nationality Directorate staff dealing with asylum applications. [52201]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am pleased to announce that a copy of the Asylum Directorate's Instructions (ADIs) is being placed in the Library. The material is subject to periodic review and revision. We shall arrange to provide the Library with any necessary amendments or new instructions as they become available.

The ADIs contain internal guidance to staff on the handling of asylum and related casework. They are being made available in accordance with the principles of openness in the White Paper on Freedom of Information and in the existing Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. A small amount of material cannot be disclosed, either on grounds of national security or because disclosure would prejudice the effective operation of immigration controls.

As with the Immigration Directorates' Instructions (IDIs), this information will be made available on the Internet as soon as possible. Consideration is also being given to other suitable ways of making this information available and members of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's After Entry User Panel will be consulted about this.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50687]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Disabled People

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the impact of reforms of the National Lottery on access to projects by disabled people. [50762]

Mr. Banks: New Policy Directions given to the Lottery distributors on 1 June require them to take into account the need to promote access for people from all sections of society. Distributors must produce strategic plans which show how they intend to do this, and these will include measures taken to encourage access for disabled people.

The National Lottery Act 1998 creates a new distributor, the New Opportunities Fund, one of whose first initiatives is to provide money to establish a network of healthy living centres, which will be of particular interest to disabled people.

Tobacco Sponsorship

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which Minister is the head of the task force on alternatives to tobacco sponsorship announced on 25 November 1997; who are its members; on what dates it has met; what meetings are currently planned; and if he will make a statement on its progress to date. [50703]

Mr. Banks: The EU Tobacco Directive provides up to three years for domestic legislation to be implemented, and a further two years for the ban on sports sponsorship by tobacco companies to be enforced. Up to a further three years may be allowed in exceptional circumstances for existing sponsorship of events organised at a global level, provided sponsorship levels and associated advertising are reduced.

With this timescale in mind, I will chair a Task Force to help sports in receipt of tobacco sponsorship to identify alternative sponsors. The Task Force has not yet been formally constituted, although I have had an initial informal meeting with sports and business interests, and will hold a further meeting in the autumn when the current exercise to collect sponsorship information from the sports concerned should be completed.

Sir Rodney Walker

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the directorships and other declarable interests in sports-related companies held by Sir Rodney Walker, Chairman of the UK Sports Council. [50741]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* Sir Rodney Walker has the following directorships and other declarable interests in sports-related companies:

Chairman: Rugby Football League

Chairman: Leicester City Plc

Chairman: Brands Hatch Leisure Plc

Trustee: London Marathon Charitable Trust

Governor: Sports Aid Foundation

Vice President: Youth Charter for Sport.

The Council has procedures for hon. Members to declare potential conflicts of interest when decisions come before them and to make appropriate arrangements to handle any potential conflicts which arise.

Cricket

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of people in the United Kingdom regularly playing cricket. [51318]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* According to the England and Wales Cricket Board, there were more than 2 million cricket participants at 6,500 affiliated clubs in 1997 throughout this country, including some 150,000 junior club members. The Government, through the English Sports Council, actively encourage all governing bodies of sport to have programmes in place which promote our policy of "sport for all" and increase participation levels in all sports, from grass roots through to elite competitors.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Efficiency Review

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has to publish the efficiency review on managing attendance in the public sector. [52204]

Dr. David Clark: This report was commissioned as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and copies have today been placed in the libraries of both Houses. The report's findings on best practice will be used to develop a programme to help improve attendance across the public sector.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many letters per day her office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50690]

Mr. Foulkes: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, Column *363*.

Population and Development Conference

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to include a parliamentarian in the delegation to the five year assessment conference, Cairo+5, on Population and Development, in The Hague in February 1999. [51623]

Mr. Foulkes: The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) which is responsible for organising the forum and issuing invitations, has not yet formally announced the arrangements for the composition of delegations. We fully expect that the contribution of parliamentarians to the review will be reflected in UNFPA's plans for the meeting.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to involve voluntary organisations in the issues to be raised at the five year assessment conference, Cairo+5, on Population and Development, in The Hague in February 1999. [51624]

Mr. Foulkes: We will work closely with civil society organisations (CSOs) throughout the quinquennial review of the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. A meeting of Department for International Development's sexual and reproductive health forum has already been held and we will shortly be establishing a joint DFID/CSO working group to co-ordinate in detail the UK's contribution to the review.

PRIME MINISTER

Dounreay

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column 598, if, during his discussions with the US Government, he was informed of their intention to transport to Dounreay the additional quantity of nine kilograms of low enriched uranium; and if he will make a statement. [48805]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to her by my hon. Friend, the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry on 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *371*.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister when he was first notified of the recommendation to close the commercial reprocessing facility at Dounreay; when the Government received the report recommending the closure; which *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials received this report; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library. [46262]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 16 June 1998]:* On 17 March 1998, the UKAEA Board considered the future of reprocessing at Dounreay and recommended that no new commercial work be accepted as part of a phased rundown to a complete cessation of reprocessing. The Chief Executive of UKAEA advised officials in the Department of Trade and Industry of the Board's proposed course of action by letter on 19 March 1998. DTI officials then had a number of discussions with UKAEA to check points in the analysis, and they submitted advice to DTI Ministers on 1 May 1998. I was first notified when the President of the Board of Trade consulted colleagues by letter on 29 May.

The Government made the announcement on 5 June that UKAEA would accept no new contracts for commercial reprocessing at Dounreay.

The Minister for Industry, Energy and Science has asked the Chairman of UKAEA to supply the information and analysis that went into the decision announced on 5 June, and he will place the Chairman's response in the Library.

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Prime Minister what plans his Office has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49821]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to him on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *389*. I also refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*.

My office is taking part in the pilot study of the development of the Government Secure Intranet (GSI).

SCOTLAND

School Sizes

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the number and percentage of primary school children who were taught in classes of 31 or more in the years *(a)* 1991–92, *(b)* 1992–93, *(c)* 1993–94, *(d)* 1994–95, *(e)* 1995–96 and *(f)* 1996–97 in each local authority area. [50249]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The information available is given in the table.

Education Authority primary schools in Scotland
Number and percentage of pupils in single stage classes over 30 by Education Authority[1]

	1991		*1993*		*1995*		*1997*	
	Number	*As a percentage of all pupils*	*Number*	*As a percentage of all pupils*	*Number*	*As a percentage of all pupils*	*Number*	*As a percentage of all pupils*
Scotland	72,371	16.4	75,082	17.1	78,749	17.9	85,580	19.5
Aberdeen City	2,462	15.9	2,744	17.4	3,118	19.7	3,767	23.8
Aberdeenshire	2,981	14.2	3,080	14.5	3,134	14.7	2,187	10.2
Angus	1,885	20.2	2,627	27.7	2,013	21.4	1,429	15.3
Argyll and Bute	952	11.7	928	12.0	1,191	15.3	1,180	15.2
Clackmannanshire	603	13.8	731	16.5	1,021	23.2	780	17.2
Dumfries and Galloway	2,137	16.8	2,052	16.0	2,016	15.6	2,381	18.5
Dundee City	3,388	26.2	3,368	26.3	3,225	25.5	3,550	28.9
East Ayrshire	1,881	16.6	2,023	17.7	2,455	21.5	1,926	16.9
East Dunbartonshire	2,553	24.6	1,983	19.5	2,497	24.1	2,873	27.0
East Lothian	828	12.2	1,015	14.4	834	11.2	1,026	12.9
East Renfrewshire	1,843	22.8	2,936	35.5	2,760	32.6	3,444	40.1
Edinburgh, City of	6,802	24.1	7,696	26.4	8,557	28.3	8,676	28.4
Eilean Siar	0	0.0	190	7.2	125	4.8	0	0.0
Falkirk	2,646	21.4	2,330	19.1	2,697	22.1	3,432	27.9
Fife	4,944	15.9	5,387	17.3	4,672	15.1	4,050	13.2
Glasgow City	7,890	15.1	7,637	14.7	8,302	16.3	9,551	19.5
Highland	1,503	7.7	1,996	10.4	1,755	9.2	1,784	9.4
Inverclyde	1,027	12.4	1,122	14.0	1,244	15.5	1,292	16.5
Midlothian	991	13.9	1,181	16.4	1,345	18.5	1,462	19.7
Moray	1,395	18.2	732	9.3	886	11.1	1,363	16.9
North Ayrshire	2,033	15.5	2,138	16.7	2,139	16.9	2,563	20.3
North Lanarkshire	4,542	14.4	4,556	15.1	4,103	13.7	5,330	17.9
Orkney Islands	157	8.7	64	3.5	33	1.8	32	1.7
Perth and Kinross	1,307	12.8	1,541	14.8	1,547	14.7	1,856	17.2
Renfrewshire	3,112	20.0	3,795	24.4	4,084	25.9	4,786	30.3
Scottish Borders	448	5.3	544	6.3	857	9.8	889	10.0
Shetland Islands	0	0.0	0	0.0	31	1.4	0	0.0
South Ayrshire	2,510	25.7	2,317	24.2	2,721	28.3	2,771	29.2
South Lanarkshire	4,594	16.4	4,289	15.7	4,386	16.3	4,329	16.1
Stirling	705	10.6	911	13.8	894	13.4	630	9.2
West Dunbartonshire	1,664	17.5	1,176	12.5	1,248	13.8	1,589	17.9
West Lothian	2,588	18.3	1,993	14.2	2,859	19.9	4,652	31.4

[1] Includes a small number of classes with more than one teacher

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the number and percentage of children in primary (1) one, (2) two and (3) three who were taught in classes of 31 or more in the years *(a)* 1991–92, *(b)* 1992–93, *(c)* 1993–94, *(d)* 1994–95, *(e)* 1995–96, *(f)* 1996–97 and *(g)* 1997–98 in (i) each local authority area and (ii) Scotland as a whole. [50250]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The information available is given in the table.

Education authority primary schools in Scotland Number and percentage of pupils in P3 classes over 30 by education authority[1]

	1991[2]		1993[2]		1995[2]		1997	
	Number	As a % of P3 pupils in single stage classes	Number	As a % of P3 pupils in single stage classes	Number	As a % of P3 pupils in single stage classes	Number	As a % of all P3 pupils
Scotland	10,960	23.1	10,763	22.5	12,196	25.5	14,465	22.8
Aberdeen City	438	23.2	219	12.4	349	17.9	570	24.7
Aberdeenshire	443	24.6	444	24.4	538	29.4	315	10.2
Angus	381	38.8	449	46.1	322	32.3	31	2.3
Argyll and Bute	220	32.6	161	29.1	162	28.5	255	22.4
Clackmannanshire	0	0.0	64	12.7	95	19.8	64	10.1
Dumfries and Galloway	417	34.6	161	17.8	224	22.9	420	21.8
Dundee City	579	38.7	417	25.9	351	23.0	580	32.9
East Ayrshire	321	25.2	257	17.8	416	34.4	349	21.1
East Dunbartonshire	447	38.3	357	31.9	314	26.4	452	29.4
East Lothian	65	8.7	132	16.0	31	3.8	192	15.9
East Renfrewshire	507	52.5	454	43.2	539	45.6	446	37.0
Edinburgh, City of	932	27.6	1,163	30.5	1,743	43.5	1,681	37.6
Eilean Siar	0	0.0	0	0.0	31	50.0	0	0.0
Falkirk	317	21.6	383	27.6	512	37.7	646	34.5
Fife	886	28.9	921	28.5	605	18.0	758	17.1
Glasgow City	1,029	16.2	1,224	19.0	1,215	20.2	1,484	21.5
Highland	251	15.2	255	17.1	249	16.4	284	10.4
Inverclyde	160	16.6	131	14.5	220	22.3	258	22.7
Midlothian	254	35.9	165	21.6	159	19.0	351	31.5
Moray	317	50.2	95	13.5	253	34.5	285	25.2
North Ayrshire	257	16.3	255	17.7	505	33.9	383	21.0
North Lanarkshire	698	20.0	508	14.5	576	17.8	1,035	24.3
Orkney Islands	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Perth and Kinross	128	12.9	161	16.5	322	32.2	348	21.7
Renfrewshire	252	13.0	700	33.3	555	26.4	685	29.4
Scottish Borders	94	15.2	98	13.3	125	16.7	157	11.7
Shetland Islands	0	0.0	0	0.0	31	17.9	0	0.07
South Ayrshire	388	33.6	316	27.4	259	24.4	516	38.7
South Lanarkshire	604	19.5	508	17.6	573	20.2	799	20.7
Stirling	160	23.4	221	31.0	98	16.2	189	19.0
West Dunbartonshire	225	21.2	319	32.8	191	18.2	159	12.5
West Lothian	190	13.1	225	13.6	633	37.8	773	36.3

[1] Includes a small number of classes with more than one teacher
[2] Excludes P3 pupils in composite classes

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the amounts paid by each local authority to COSLA in 1997. [50869]

Mr. Macdonald: The information requested is not held by The Scottish Office.

Timber Industry

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received regarding the impact of current levels of imports of timber from the Baltic states on the United Kingdom timber processing industry. [50815]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues have received several representations from individuals and from representative groups about the effect of imports of timber from the Baltic states on the forestry and timber processing industries.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from the Forestry Industry Committee of Great Britain regarding the current level of supply of sawn timber. [50819]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend received a letter from the Forestry Industry Council of Great Britain in February this year about current factors affecting the forestry industry, including the level of supply of sawn timber.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the average selling price of softwoods harvested in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years. [50816]

Mr. Macdonald: The average selling prices of conifers sold standing by the Forestry Commission in Britain over each of the last 10 years are given in the table. Information on sales by the private sector is not available.

Year ended 31 March	*£/cubic metre*
1989	15.80
1990	15.14
1991	13.75
1992	11.22
1993	12.33
1994	13.87
1995	17.28
1996	16.59
1997	15.92
1998	13.35

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the acreage of softwoods *(a)* planted and *(b)* harvested in each of the last 10 years. [50818]

Mr. Macdonald: The areas of conifers planted and felled or approved for felling in Britain in each of the last 10 years are given in the table. All areas are in thousands of hectares.

Year ended 31 March	*Area planted*	*Area approved for felling*
1989	37	12
1990	24	16
1991	22	15
1992	22	13
1993	20	18
1994	18	17
1995	19	18
1996	17	19
1997	18	18
1998	17	19

Notes:

1. The areas planted include both areas of felled woodland which were replanted and the areas of new woodlands which were created
2. The Forestry Commission does not record the areas felled by private woodland owners, but it does record the areas approved for felling. However, approvals are valid for a five year period, and many areas which are approved for felling are never felled

Higher Education

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, (1) pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister for Education and Industry of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 155, if he will place in the Library the legal advice he received that European students from the United Kingdom may be charged more for university fees in Scotland than mainland continental EU students; [50907]

(2) if he will make a statement on the external legal advice his Department received on university fees in Scotland. [50908]

Mr. Wilson: No. It is not usual practice to disclose legal advice obtained.

Legal Advice

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in what circumstances his Department discloses the contents of external legal advice which it has received. [50909]

Mr. Dewar: It is not normal practice to disclose the contents of legal advice received, and it is not possible to comment in abstract on any exceptional circumstances in which that practice might be departed from.

Health Service

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many whole-time equivalent NHS consultants there are in post in occupational health, and how many of these are (i) full and (ii) part-time in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland. [51110]

Mr. Galbraith: The information requested is shown in the table.

Consultants in Occupational Health; by health board area and contract type: at 30 September 1997

Whole time equivalent

	Total	*Whole time*	*Maximum part-time*	*Part-time*	*Honorary*
Scotland	11.1	8.0	1.0	0.8	1.3
Argyll and Clyde	1.0	1.0	—	—	—
Fife	1.6	—	1.0	0.6	—
Forth Valley	1.0	1.0	—	—	—
Greater Glasgow	3.0	3.0	—	—	—
Lanarkshire	1.6	1.0	—	—	0.6
Lothian	1.6	1.0	—	—	0.6
Shetland	0.2	—	—	0.2	—
Tayside	1.0	1.0	—	—	—

Source:
Medical and Dental Census ISD Scotland

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many unfilled NHS consultant or approved training posts there are in occupational health in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland. [51114]

Mr. Galbraith: There were no unfilled NHS consultant posts in occupational health in Scotland at 30 September 1997.

Vacancy data for approved training posts are not collected centrally.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list those NHS trusts which have access to an occupational health service, and which of those services are led by a consultant in occupational health. [51111]

Mr. Galbraith: Current guidance (updated 1995) requires that Health Boards, Trusts and independent contractors ensure that all their staff should have access to Occupational Health Services either provided by the employer or obtainable from another provider. In addition, arrangements should be made to provide every Occupational Health Team with access to and advice from a consultant occupational physician as required.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list his duties in respect of the safety of (i) staff employed in the NHS, (ii) patients and (iii) visitors to NHS premises. [51105]

Mr. Galbraith: There is no statutory duty which places responsibility on the Secretary of State for Scotland to ensure that Trusts meet the provisions of the health and safety legislation. Staff employed in the NHS have the same statutory protection as all employees to whom the Health and Safety at Work legislation applies.

In so far as patients and visitors to NHS premises are concerned, both in terms of statute and at common law, the obligation is placed on the "occupier" of the premises to ensure their safety. The Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 requires the occupier to show such care as is reasonable in order that a person entering the premises will not suffer injury or damage by reasons of the state of the premises. The obligations and duties are thus placed on the legal entity occupying/controlling the premises and not the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many working days were lost through sickness, ill health or injury by NHS staff in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland in the last year for which figures are available; and what was the estimated total cost of those lost days. [51102]

Mr. Galbraith: The answer could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps the NHS Management Executive in Scotland is taking to monitor the compliance with health and safety legislation of NHS trusts. [51097]

Mr. Galbraith: The NHS in Scotland Management Executive is reviewing Occupational Health and Safety Services for NHS and associated staff in Scotland with a view to implementing recommendations early in 1999.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps have been taken to ensure that NHS trusts have adequate arrangements for recording accidents at NHS premises; what encouragement is given to staff to report accidents; and what steps the NHS Management Executive in Scotland has taken to improve the safety performance of NHS trusts. [51103]

Mr. Galbraith: The NHS in Scotland Management Executive has regularly reminded NHS Trusts of their responsibilities in ensuring they are taking steps to meet fully their statutory Health and Safety obligations.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps are being taken to make occupational health services available to staff working in primary care. [51113]

Mr. Galbraith: Current guidance (updated 1995) requires that Health Boards, Trusts and independent contractors ensure that all their staff should have access to Occupational Health Services either provided by the employer or obtainable from another provider.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what responsibility the NHS Management Executive in Scotland has for ensuring that trusts meet the provisions of health and safety legislation. [51109]

Mr. Galbraith: There is no statutory duty which places responsibility on the NHS Management Executive to ensure that Trusts meet the provisions of the health and safety legislation. The ME does, however, issue directions/guidance to Trusts on health and safety issues.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what percentage of NHS staff have access to an occupational health service in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland. [51112]

Mr. Galbraith: Current guidance (updated 1995) requires that Health Boards, Trusts and independent contractors ensure that all their staff should have access to Occupational Health Services either provided by the employer or obtainable from another provider.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps are being taken to protect staff against violence on health care premises. [51098]

Mr. Galbraith: The first HR Strategy for the NHS in Scotland "Towards a New Way of Working" gives an undertaking to develop practical measures aimed at improving the personal safety and security of staff.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how many NHS employees were killed or injured at work in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland in each year since 1991; [51101]

(2) how many reports under the reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1985 were received in each year since 1991 in respect of NHS employees in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland. [51100]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply:

Injuries in Scotland to employees in the NHS as reported to HSE 1991–92 to 1997–98

Year	*Fatal*	*Major*	*Over 3 day*	*Total*
1991–92	0	71	902	973
1992–93	0	54	767	821
1993–94	0	70	751	821
1994–95	0	80	946	1,026
1995–96	1	73	847	921
1996–97	0	105	817	922
1997–98[1]	0	113	863	976

[1] Provisional

Notes:

1. NHS is identified by using HSE industry environment code 951 for 1991–92 to 1995–96 and client status 06 for 1996–97 and 1997–98[1]. Injury data in respect of individual health boards cannot be identified from HSE's computer databases. Data are available by local authority
2. Years commence 1 April
3. Injuries are reportable to HSE under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR 95). Prior to the figures for 1996–97, injuries were reportable under RIDDOR 85, which used a different definition for reportable non-fatal injuries. Figures for non-fatal injuries reported under the different legislation are therefore not directly comparable

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list the NHS trusts which have been found, since 1991, to be in breach of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 indicating in each case the nature of the breaches; [51107]

(2) if he will list the NHS trusts which *(a)* have been prosecuted and *(b)* have received prohibition or improvement notices under health and safety legislation since 1991. [51106]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Between 1 April 1991 and 31 March 1998, the Greater Glasgow Health Board was prosecuted by the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Field Operations Division (FOD) on 21 February 1992 for a breach of Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act. No other prosecutions have been taken in Scotland.

Improvement Notices have been issued against the following NHS trusts by HSE's FOD in Scotland between 1 April 1996 and 31 March 1998:

Dumfries and Galloway Community Health NHS Trust

East and Midlothian NHS Trust

Southern General NHS Trust

Dundee Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Western Isles Health Board.

There have been no Prohibition Notices. Prior to 1996–97, notices against the NHS cannot be identified from HSE's computer databases. HSE holds no

information on the number of "breaches" which do not result in a prosecution or the issuing of an Improvement or Prohibition Notice.

Transport Policy

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Government's transport policy in Scotland. [51819]

Mr. Dewar: I have today published "Travel Choices for Scotland" the Government's White Paper on Integrated Transport in Scotland. The White Paper fulfils our manifesto commitment and sets out the Government's aims for a sustainable, effective and integrated transport system appropriate for the needs of Scotland's people, environment and economy. The White Paper is complementary to the United Kingdom White Paper presented to the House by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 784–88.

We will encourage each local authority to develop an integrated Local Transport Strategy suited to local circumstances and needs, drawing together all the resources and planning functions of the authority and in co-operation with local public transport operators, the community and business. We will consult on the details of implementation. We will also publish consultative draft planning guidance on Transport and Planning.

We will establish a Scottish Public Transport Fund from which local authorities can bid for assistance for key value for money developments for their local public transport network consistent with their Local Transport Strategy.

For buses, legislation will be brought forward to allow bus Quality Partnerships between local authorities and operators to have a statutory basis. Where these arrangements have been shown to be unable to bring about satisfactory improvements to service levels and quality, legislation will allow for local authorities to introduce Quality Contracts to ensure provision.

To help address the problems of traffic congestion and poor local air quality legislation will be brought forward to enable local authorities to introduce local road user charges and a levy on workplace parking as part of their Local Transport Strategy. An appropriate proportion of the net revenues raised would be available for authorities to invest in value for money improvements to the local transport network, increasing opportunities and choice. We will consult on the details before any legislation is brought forward.

Legislation on road use charging will be framed to allow for charging on motorways and trunk roads. We will establish a new Trunk Roads development budget to fund technical studies and other preparatory work to allow the legislation to be implemented as speedily as practically possible. Net revenues raised from any such charging could be used to help meet cost of improvements and upgrading to the network that might not otherwise have been affordable.

We will assist the development of informal Regional Transport Partnerships to improve and co-ordinate transport planning across individual local authority boundaries. We will consult on the way forward for these partnerships and on the role of the National Transport Forum at a Scotland level. We will also discuss with the National Transport Forum targets for measuring progress in delivering our agenda.

The GB Strategic Rail Authority will be established with the Scottish Executive having a major influence over rail services in Scotland. The Authority will help deliver improvements in terms of fares and the quality and reliability of services. We are committed to improving the opportunities for rail freight.

We will work with transport operators and user groups to produce a Scottish National Public Transport Timetable and to develop better through ticketing arrangements.

We will commission a Scottish Airports and Air Service Study to contribute to the development of a UK airports policy. We will continue long-term support for operation and development of Caledonian MacBrayne ferries and secure the long-term provision of lifeline ferry services to Orkney and Shetland. We will bring forward legislation to extend Freight Facilities Grants to coastal shipping.

We will develop a process to ensure that all new major policy initiatives or changes are consistent with our transport policy. We will also ensure that transport policy reflects policies on health promotion, on increased walking and cycling, on economic development and on social exclusion including exploring the scope to apply discounted fare schemes more widely.

The proposals in the White Paper represent a first critical step in developing a transport system that covers peoples' transport needs across Scotland. It will begin a new chapter in the history of Scottish transport.

Further Education

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish his report on the discharge of his duties for further education in Scotland as required under section 1 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992; and if he will make a statement. [52146]

Mr. Dewar: My Report on Further Education in Scotland for 1997 has been published today and has been laid before each House of Parliament.

Copies are available in the Library of the House.

The Report, entitled "Further Education in Scotland 1997: Report by the Secretary of State for Scotland" shows this Government's commitment to increasing participation in further education and providing opportunities for lifelong learning for all. We want to widen access to groups of people who are under-represented in the ranks of FE students, for instance by reason of age or social or economic background. Much has been achieved, with the figures for 1996–97, revealing for example, a marked increase in the number of students aged 25 or over. We are building on that progress.

We want to see, through development of a strategic framework focusing on both access and collaboration, a situation in which colleges see each other as partners rather than rivals in the provision of FE, working together to plan to offer a balance of FE provision which better reflects both student and labour market demands.

Further Education is entering a new era. It is positioned at the cross-roads of both Scottish education and of many of the Government's key policies and initiatives. Big challenges lie ahead but the FE sector has always demonstrated its ability and determination to respond to such challenges. The new era was launched last week when I announced an additional £214m for FE over the next 3 years to address historic underfunding, stabilise the sector's financial position and support further increases in student numbers.

My intention is to work with the FE colleges towards the shared objective of the opportunity of quality further education for all of Scotland's people, to enable them to fulfil their potential, not only contributing to but sharing in our future economic prosperity.

Marine Dredging Licences

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about progress on new procedures for the licensing of marine dredged minerals in Scotland. [52147]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government intend to introduce new regulations to license the extraction of minerals by marine dredging in Scotland by March 1999. The new procedures should make the process for obtaining licenses more open and efficient. The regulations will also address environmental concerns over the impact of dredging by implementing the requirements of EEC Directive 85/337/EEC (as amended by EC Directive 11/97/EEC) on Environmental Impact Assessment in so far as they apply to the extraction of minerals by marine dredging. There will be appropriate consultation on the provisions in due course.

The decision to introduce the regulations by March 1999 means that it is no longer necessary to put in place an interim scheme to administer the very limited dredging activity that takes place in Scotland as was announced to the House on 17 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *212*.

DEFENCE

Copthorne Barracks, Shrewsbury

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time military personnel are based at the Copthorne Barracks, Shrewsbury. [50549]

Dr. Reid: There are 104 full-time military personnel and 15 non-regular permanent staff currently based at Copthorne Barracks. There are in addition some 234 Territorial Army personnel based at the barracks.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the Copthorne Barracks in Shrewsbury in each of the last three years. [50550]

Dr. Reid: The costs of Copthorne Barracks, including pay and related costs of units based there, were some £13.5 million in 1997–98. Comparable figures for the previous two years are not available but are estimated to have been of a similar order.

Animal Experiments (Porton Down)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of the animals subjected to experiments at Porton Down in each of the last five years died as a result of the experiments; and what happened to those animals that did not die. [50626]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the number of animals which died as a result of experiments at Porton Down.

A total of 44,913 procedures were carried out at the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency at Porton Down over the last five years. At the end the majority of the experiments, surviving animals were killed humanely using an approved method as specified in the project licence issued under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Information on the number of procedures resulting in the deaths of animals is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

In 1990, a revision to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 required the number of procedures to be recorded rather than the number of animals involved. In most cases, the number of procedures equates to the number of animals. However, in some cases more than one procedure was carried out on a single animal. For example, during the last five years, a few horses and sheep were used to produce blood products and every blood sample taken was recorded as a procedure. These animals were not euthanised as part of the procedures. The number of procedures quoted above therefore overestimates the number of animals involved.

I hope that this information is helpful.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what species and breeds of animals have been subjected to experiments in each of the last five years at Porton Down. [50638]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your letter about the species and breeds of animals used in experiments at Porton Down in each of the last five years.

The species of animals used at the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency at Porton Down during the last five years (1993 to 1997), together with breeds commonly used, are shown in the table below:

Species	*Breeds commonly used at CBD*
Goat[1]	
Guinea-pig	Dunken Hartley
Hamster[2]	Syrian
Horse[1]	
Macaque[4]	Rhesus
Marmoset	Common
Mouse	Porton mouse, BALB/C, hybrids
Pig	Large White
Rabbit	New Zealand White, Dutch Belted
Rat	Porton Wistar
Sheep	Mules, cross breeds

[1] 1997 only
[2] 1996 and 1997
[3] 1993 only
[4] 1993, 1996 and 1997

I hope that this information is helpful.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many animals have been subjected to experiments at Porton Down in each of the last five years. [50636]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the number of animals involved in experiments in each of the last five years.

The number of procedures conducted during each calendar year at the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency at Porton Down since 1993 are shown in the table below:

Year	*Number of procedures*
1993	6,697
1994	7,416
1995	8,747
1996	11,097
1997	10,956
Total	44,913

In 1990, a revision to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 required the number of procedures to be recorded rather than the number of animals involved. In most cases, the number of procedures equates to the number of animals. However, in some cases more than one procedure was carried out on a single animal. For example, during the last five years, a few horses and sheep were used to produce blood products and every blood sample taken was recorded as a procedure. These animals were not euthanised as part of the procedures. The number of procedures quoted above therefore overestimates the number of animals involved.

Fast Jet Pilots

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many fast jet pilots he estimates will leave on voluntary retirement before normal retirement age before EFA 2000 is in service; and if he will make a statement. [50839]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The Eurofighter is scheduled to enter service in mid 2002.

In the four financial years until then we estimate that the number of fast-jet pilots who will have left the RAF before the normal retirement age (55) will have been as follows:

Point of exit during service career	*Forecast number*[1]
8 years service[2]	15
12 years service[2]	25
Age 38/16 years service[2]	100
Age 44/22 years service[2]	5
Premature Voluntary Release	90
Total	235

[1] Forecast rounded to nearest 5

[2] Points at which an individual has the right to leave in accordance with his/her terms of service

Specialist Procurement Services Agency

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Specialist Procurement Services Agency for the financial year 1998–99. [52202]

Mr. Spellar: The Chief Executive of the Specialist Procurement Services (SPS) Agency is responsible for providing cost forecasting and pricing advice, quality assurance surveillance and asset accounting services to the Ministry of Defence as defined within the Agency Framework Document. During 1998–99 the SPS will be set the following key targets:

1. 20 per cent. improvement in SPS services identified by customers;
2. 90 per cent. of SPS reports delivered within dates agreed with customers;
3. Asset Accounting centre to audit:
   a. 96 per cent. of core accounts within the 12 month period;
   b. 100 per cent. of major accounts over the three year period;
4. Cost forecasting advice will be available to 93 per cent. of Category A and B equipment projects, as agreed within the agreed MOD Equipment Approval Committee programme.

Disposal Sales Agency

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Disposal Sales Agency for the financial year 1998–99. [52203]

Mr. Spellar: The Disposal Sales Agency was established as an agency within the Ministry of Defence on 1 October 1994. Its role is to provide a disposal sales service for surplus equipment stores, spares and other material belonging to the Ministry of Defence and other public sector organisations.

The Chief Executive of the Agency has been set the following key targets for the financial year 1998–89:

1. To achieve disposal sales income of £30M from Government to Government sales of surplus capital equipment and stores.
2. To achieve disposal sales income of £30M from commercial sales of MOD's surplus items.
3. To extend the Agency's disposal services to other public sector organisations and to secure an additional £1M of sales income as a result.
4. To develop, contract for, and introduce new IT systems by 31 March 1999, taking account of the Year 2000 requirements for equipment and software.
5. To put in place the mechanisms fully to test the level of customer satisfaction for the Agency's services, and those services provided by its appointed contractors.
6. To reduce the unit cost of generating £1M of sales to £65,000 from a baseline figure of £90,500 achieved in 1994–95.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many applications for licences for the export of *(a)* paramilitary, *(b)* security and *(c)* police equipment to Ethiopia have been (i) granted, (ii) refused and (iii) revoked, (1) between February 1995 and May 1997 inclusive and (2) since May 1997; and what was the export licence category in each case. [50584]

Mrs. Roche: The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 February 1995 and 1 May 1997, 19 Individual Export Licences were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Ethiopia of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List: 18 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and one Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL). Between 2 May 1997 and 19 June 1998, 2 SIELs were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Ethiopia of goods subject to export control by being listed in the Military List. In the same period, no OIELs covering such exports were issued.

No SIELs or OIELs covering such exports were revoked and no applications for SIELs or OIELs covering such exports were refused in either period.

The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual Export Licences issued between 1 February 1995 and 19 June 1998 covering the export to Ethiopia of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued between 1 February 1995 and 1 May 1997 covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued between 1 February 1995 and 1 May 1997 covering goods with this rating*	*Number of SIELs issued between 2 May 1997 and 19 June 1998 covering goods with this rating*
ML6	5	0	0
ML10	2	0	0
ML11	9	1	2
ML22	0	0	1
PL5017	1	0	0
PL5027	1	0	0

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

It is not possible to break down these data in the manner requested as the equipment covered by many entries in the Military List could be used by military, paramilitary or police end-users.

In addition, goods on the Military List may have been exported to Ethiopia under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Eurostar

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the competition issues arising from the equity participation by British Airways in Eurostar. [51289]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has announced, London and Continental Railways (LCR) will retain ownership of Eurostar (UK) Ltd. (EUKL)—the UK arm of the Eurostar international passenger train service. LCR will award a management contract to operate EUKL to a consortium comprising National Express Group, the national railways of France and Belgium, and British Airways. Those arrangements, details of which have yet to be settled, will be considered by the relevant competition authorities. In the first instance, it will be for the Director General of Fair Trading to consider whether those arrangements may give rise to a qualifying merger under the Fair Trading Act 1973.

Post Office

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the total value of receipts from the sale of surplus assets by the Post Office in *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98. [51579]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* I understand from the Post Office that the total proceeds received from sales of property were £40 million in 1995–96, £42 million in 1996–97, and £23 million in 1997–98.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total estimated value of Post Office surplus properties currently on the market. [51576]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* I understand from the Post Office that the total estimated value of their freehold properties currently on the market is £4 million. This excludes property under offer or on which contracts have been exchanged.

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many potential purchasers of Post Office surplus properties who subsequently defaulted on the contract to buy were subject to legal action by the Post Office in 1996–97. [51578]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* I understand from the Post Office that there have been no such cases.

Aerospace Industry (Lancashire)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the aerospace sector in Lancashire. [51629]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The Government are aware of the major economic importance of the aerospace industry for Lancashire, and for the North-West region more generally. This region is the largest single centre of UK aerospace activity, supporting 60,000 jobs. The Government work closely with the Consortium of Lancashire Aerospace to enhance this sector's competitiveness further.

Inventions, Designs and Trade Marks Protection

Ms Corston: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has for assisting business in protecting its inventions, designs and trademarks. [52150]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I am delighted to announce that I have today caused three Statutory Instruments to be laid which, subject to Parliamentary approval, will from 1 October 1998 substantially reduce the fees charged by the Patent Office in connection with patents, trade marks and registered designs. These reductions, coupled with others connected with international trade marks being introduced administratively, will in a full year amount to some £12 million, equal to 20 per cent. of the Office's present income from fees. The reductions have been made possible by major improvements in quality of service and substantial cost savings achieved by the Patent Office since its relocation to Wales in 1991. A number of fees are to be abolished altogether and this will be a major benefit in particular to small firms and private individuals. In addition we are reducing renewal fees on granted patents by an average of 18 per cent. with larger reductions in the earlier years when the full commercial potential of an invention may not have been realised.

This is a significant contribution to enhancing the competitiveness of British Industry and commerce and is very good news for all users of the Patent Office, especially small and medium-sized firms.

Competitiveness White Paper

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects to publish her Department's Competitiveness White Paper. [50226]

Mrs. Beckett: The White Paper will be published in the Autumn.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what were the results of the consultation on the Working Time Directive in respect of the inclusion of an explanatory code for the definition of working time; and if she will make a statement; [51637]

(2) if she will include, within the legislation for the Working Time Directive, provision for an explanatory code for the definition of working time. [51636]

Mr. Ian McCartney: A number of respondents to the consultation exercise asked for further guidance on the definition of working time. This will be provided in the guidance that we intend to publish during the Summer.

Export Explorer Programme

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress she has made in setting up the Export Explorer programme; what assessment she has made of its value to small businesses; and if she will make a statement. [50227]

Mrs. Roche: A full programme of *Export Explorer* visits is planned from September to March 1999, and will be run in conjunction with Business Links, trade associations, and other business support agencies. The pilot stage of the programme has demonstrated that the *Export Explorer* is welcomed by business, and can play an important part in helping small and medium enterprises to develop their international potential.

HEALTH

Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee

Ms Beverley Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will announce the Government's response to the Third report of the Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee; and if he will make a statement. [52151]

Mr. Milburn: I am very pleased to tell the House that the Government accept the main recommendation of the Third Report of the Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee (MWSAC), that the annual intake of medical students in the United Kingdom should be increased by about 1,000.

The Government intend to phase the increase, so that approximately 5,450 students will be admitted by the year 2001 and approximately 6,000 will be admitted by 2005. This will allow the expansion in facilities dedicated to medical education to take place in a planned and orderly manner, and will allow the increase to be reviewed over time, in the light of other work on medical productivity, the recruitment and retention of doctors, and more generally, the future role of doctors and other professionals.

In parallel with the phased increase, the Government will seek to engage the medical profession and others in discussions about the future shape of the healthcare workforce, including such issues as productivity and skill substitution, and the implications for education and training.

The full response to the MWSAC recommendations has been placed in the Library.

NHS Ambulance Trusts

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment his Department has made of the age of ambulances in United Kingdom NHS ambulance trusts; and if he will publish the results. [51802]

Mr. Boateng: The Department recently conducted an informal assessment of the age of accident and emergency vehicles in National Health Service ambulance trusts in England. When the information is analysed, copies of the results will be placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Teacher Training Courses

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teacher training courses have been withdrawn, or have suspended recruitment, broken down by subject, for 1998 starts. [51820]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following providers will be ceasing to offer the following courses to prospective students from September 1998:

Greenwich University—history, mathematics, English, religious studies, information technology, modern foreign languages, business and information technology and science

King Alfred's College Winchester—design and technology

North East Essex Coastal Confederation—geography

Nene College—mathematics, English, science and geography

Loughborough University of Technology—design and technology.

The following providers have temporarily suspended recruitment for all the subjects they offer; these are:

Douay Martyrs Consortium—history, geography, English, mathematics, modern foreign languages, science and religious education courses

East Midlands Initial Teacher Training—design and technology, mathematics and science courses.

School Inspections

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what differences there are in the criteria he expects OFSTED to use in assessing EBD and non-EBD schools. [51633]

Mr. Byers: This is a matter for OFSTED. I have asked HM Chief Inspector, Chris Woodhead, to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Internet

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those private and public organisations involved in UK Net Year; how many schools have so far been connected to the Internet in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [51313]

Dr. Howells: UK Net Year is a private sector initiative developed and funded by industry. Details of the organisations involved with the initiative can be found on its website, at http://www.uknetyear.org.

The Department will publish towards the end of this year the results of a survey of ICT in provision in schools which will indicate how many schools were connected to the Internet by March 1998. Subsequent annual surveys will indicate the change in growth of schools with such connections.

WALES

Car Costs

10. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the costs of running a car in the rural parts of Wales. [50277]

Mr. Hain: Responses to the consultation exercise launched last year on the development of an integrated transport policy included a number relating to the interests of rural areas.

Primary Schools

11. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on funding for primary schools from September. [50278]

Mr. Hain: It is for individual local authorities to decide on their budgets for primary schools and to support schools in improving standards year by year. Resources are distributed in accordance with each authority's local management of schools scheme. We have provided an additional £50 million for revenue funding for all schools in 1998–99 plus £3.7 million to fund an additional 278 infant class teachers from September 1998.

Education Funding

12. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the current level of funding for education per pupil *(a)* in Denbighshire and *(b)* in Wales as a whole. [50279]

Mr. Hain: Estimated net current expenditure per pupil for 1998–99 is £2,331 in Denbighshire and £2,433 in Wales. It is for each authority to decide on funding for individual services; taking account in the case of schools of the priority we attach to driving up standards and securing improved outcomes for all pupils.

Welsh Development Agency

13. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact of the comprehensive public expenditure review upon the budget and activities of the Welsh Development Agency. [50280]

Mr. Ron Davies: On 14 July, I announced an additional £2.2 billion to the Welsh budget over the next three years. A consultation paper will be issued in September inviting views on the detailed allocations within the Welsh budget; decisions will be announced later in the year.

Cardiology Services

14. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to develop paediatric cardiology and cardiac surgery services in Wales. [50281]

Mr. Win Griffiths: We are committed to the provision of high quality cardiac services for the children of Wales. The Department, in consultation with the health authorities, is currently considering the maintenance and development of the service.

Secondary Schools

15. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning class sizes in secondary schools in Wales. [50282]

Mr. Hain: None.

NHS Hospitals

16. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will review his plans for *(a)* NHS hospitals and *(b)* NHS staffing, following the comprehensive spending review. [50283]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Following the Government's Spending Review announcement, my right hon. Friend announced, on 17 July 1998, over £1 billion over the next three years for the NHS in Wales. We shall consult in September on the detailed allocations for the three years ahead.

Drug Rehabilitation

17. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to increase access to drug rehabilitation programmes in Wales. [50284]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation programmes is primarily a matter for local authorities and health authorities as the main purchasers of these services on behalf of individual clients. In the light of concern about the level of referrals by purchasers to residential rehabilitation services in Wales, the Department has commissioned an independent review of purchasing requirements for, and the provision of, drug and alcohol residential and community facilities in Wales. A report of the outcomes of this review should be available in September. In the meantime, the Department provides direct funding in support of voluntary organisations which provide residential facilities offering treatment and rehabilitation to those misusing drugs and alcohol.

EU Structural Funds

18. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which parts of the Principality he expects to have their status altered as regards EU structural funds. [50285]

Mr. Hain: The Commission's draft regulations for the Structural and Cohesion Funds which are part of the Agenda 2000 package were published on the 18 March 1998. The Regulations must now be agreed by all fifteen Member States and approved where appropriate by the European Parliament.

Our overriding concern in the long negotiations ahead is to ensure that these draft Regulations are fair, affordable and durable, particularly to the UK and its regions. We do not expect the Regulations for the Structural and Cohesion Funds to be adopted until early 1999. It would therefore be premature to speculate on which areas might qualify or on the amount of any aid which they might receive once the new Regulations come into effect.

Class Sizes

19. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many schools currently have class sizes of over 30 for five, six and seven-year-olds; and how many will have such class sizes after September. [50286]

Mr. Hain: In September 1997 there were 563 schools with 1,063 infant classes of over 30 children. School census data for January 1998 will be available shortly. Grants totalling £3.7 million for 1998–99 have been awarded to 280 schools, mainly for additional teachers. This will reduce the number of infant classes with over 30 children by 683. Information on the number of schools with infant class sizes of over 30 in the 1998–99 school year will be collected by the January 1999 School Census.

Economic Strategy

21. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the economic strategy for Wales "Pathways to Prosperity", which was published on 7 July. [50288]

25. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the economic strategy for Wales published in early July. [50292]

Mr. Ron Davies: "Pathway to Prosperity—A New Economic Agenda for Wales" represents an important first step in addressing the economic challenges which face Wales. I was most grateful for the opportunity to debate its contents in the meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee which took place on 13 July 1998.

Welsh Assembly

23. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the level of staff and office salaries and allowances for the National Assembly for Wales. [50290]

Mr. Ron Davies: The National Assembly Advisory Group has considered the issue of support for Members in its consultation paper, "The National Assembly for Wales: Have your Say On How It Will Work" a copy of which is in the Library of the House, but have not addressed the levels of staffing support, salaries and allowances for Members. The Group will make its final recommendations to me in due course. I have not received any other representations on members' support staff or associated costs.

I have asked the Senior Salaries Review Body to consider the salaries and initial allowances to be paid to enable Members of the National Assembly to carry out their duties effectively; I expect that it will report its recommendations to me early next year.

Minimum Wage

24. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the implications of the minimum wage for employees in Wales. [50291]

Mr. Hain: I have received 27 representations concerning the implications of the minimum wage for employees in Wales.

Hill Farming

26. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on hill farming incomes in Wales. [50293]

Mr. Win Griffiths: In 1996–97 average net farm incomes for cattle and sheep farms in the Welsh Less Favoured Areas fell by 22 per cent. compared with the previous year, to £14,300. In 1997–98 they are forecast to fall by just over 40 per cent. compared with 1996–97, to £8,500. The Government recognise the seriousness of the situation and has taken significant steps to help livestock farmers.

Farmers (Financial Aid)

27. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning future financial aid for farmers in Wales. [50294]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend and I have received a considerable number of representations, both written and oral, in respect of future financial aid for farmers in Wales. We are fully aware of the problems facing farmers and are keeping the matter under review.

Further Education

28. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his strategy for further education in Wales. [50295]

Mr. Hain: My strategy for further education in Wales is inextricably linked to our lifelong learning proposals set out in our Green Paper 'Learning Is For Everyone' (LIFE), on which we are consulting. Together, the outcome of the LIFE consultation and the work of the Education and Training Action Group (ETAG) will help shape the future of post-16 learning in Wales.

Inward Investment

29. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what inward investment in Wales has been announced since May 1997. [50296]

Mr. Ron Davies: Since this Government came into office, 145 inward investment projects have been recorded for Wales promising almost 10,000 new jobs, over 4,000 safeguarded jobs and capital investment of over £660 million.

Methadone

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to reduce the number of deaths from methadone in Wales. [50289]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Methadone can be obtained only on prescription. The North Wales Health Authority operates a project where the administration of the drug is supervised by the pharmacists. The Dyfed Powys Health Authority will shortly embark upon a similar scheme which, in common with the North Wales Health Authority scheme, will promote the need for care amongst misusers and encourage close working between health professionals and other agencies. The results will be evaluated and, if successful, consideration will be given to applying the projects in other parts of Wales.

Health Service Deficit

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the aggregate net deficit of the Welsh health authorities and hospital trusts on 31 March; and what estimate he has made of the likely aggregate net deficit on 31 March 1999. [51232]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The net deficit of the Welsh health bodies for 31 March 1998 and forecast position for 31 March 1999 is as follows:

£ million

	Cumulative position as at 31 March 1997	[1] [2]*Deficit 1997–98*	[3]*Forecast deficits 1998–99*
Health authorities	(14)	(10)	(12)
NHS trusts	1	(9)	(23)

[1] 1997–98 Unaudited Annual accounts of health authorities and NHS trusts in Wales. These figures should be treated as provisional
[2] Health Authorities are not under a duty to remain in balance in income and expenditure terms but must remain within their cash limit. No health authority breached its cash limit in 1997–98
[3] Figures are estimates provided by health authorities and NHS trusts in Wales

The 26 trusts are forecasting a total end of year deficit of £23 million in their financial returns for May 1998. The prospective health authority deficits for the current year are subject to review but may be in the region of £12 million. These forecasts are, in some instances, prior to formal contracts having been signed between the trusts and their main commissioners for 1998–99. Additionally, these estimates are before any financial support which may be offered by the Welsh Office has been taken into account.

Health Economists

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many health economists are employed by each health authority in Wales. [51195]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Only North Wales Health Authority employs a health economist; it is a joint appointment with the University of Wales, Bangor.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the estimated total expenditure in its first year of operation and the population to be served by each proposed new NHS trust in Wales. [51197]

Mr. Win Griffiths: While recognising that trusts do not operate within artificial boundaries, the main areas and population and estimated expenditure for each of the proposed new trusts, if approved, are shown on the following table.

Proposed trust	*Unitary authority areas served*	*Population (mid 1996)*	*Total estimated expenditure £000*
Conwy and Denbighshire	Conwy/Denbighshire	202,800	106,432
North East Wales	Flintshire/Wrexham	268,200	101,379
North West Wales	Gwynedd/Isle of Anglesey	184,800	115,295
Carmarthen	Carmarthenshire	169,100	81,363
Canolbarth Cymru	Ceredigion/Powys	194,000	72,573
Bro Morgannwg	Neath Port Talbot/Bridgend	269,500	161,101
Swansea	Swansea	230,200	173,294
Pontypridd and Rhondda	Rhondda Cynon Taf (Part)	240,100	86,130
South Bro Taf Community	Cardiff/Vale of Glamorgan	434,400	75,548

Proposed trust	*Unitary authority areas served*	*Population (mid 1996)*	*Total estimated expenditure*[1] *£000*
University Hospital of Wales and Llandough Hospital	Cardiff/Vale of Glamorgan	Included in figure above	237,309
Gwent Healthcare	Blaenau Gwent/Torfaen/Newport/Caerphilly/ Monmouthshire	556,200	232,057

[1] Included Cynon Valley population served by North Glamorgan NHS Trust
[2] Includes Cynon Valley population served by North Glamorgan NHS Trust

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what cost-benefit analysis was undertaken prior to the proposal to establish a single NHS trust for Gwent; and if he will publish that analysis. [51196]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Gwent Health Authority undertook a review, between October 1997 and January 1998, of the current configuration of NHS trusts within its area, including informal local consultation with all interested parties and an analysis of all the possible options for change. Final recommendations were submitted to me in February 1998 and a copy of the Gwent Health Authority's report is being placed in the Library of the House. Further details about Gwent Health Authority's recommendations can be obtained from its Chief Executive.

Nursery Places

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on progress in Wales in the provision of nursery and pre-school places under his childcare strategy. [51211]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I am giving careful consideration to the early years development plans for 1998–99 submitted by Welsh local authorities. From 1 September an early years education place should be available to all four year olds whose parents want one. The Government's objective for future years is to increase the level of provision available to three-year-olds through a combination of local authority, private and voluntary sector settings. The additional resources I announced for education on 15 July will have a part to play in this.

We are also making resources available under the National Childcare Strategy in Wales to ensure that all providers of nursery and pre-school care are able to play their part in meeting our objectives for child care and early education. In 1998–99 £50,000 will be available for good pre-school playgroups which are threatened with closure. And we will make available £250,000 to ensure that child care provision can expand to complement early years education places for four-year-olds. Details of how this money will be made available will be announced shortly.

Strategic Development (Powys)

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for future Government funding for the strategic development scheme in Powys; and if he will make a statement. [51027]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Office, in consultation with the Welsh Local Government Association and other groups, is reviewing the arrangements for delegated Strategic Development Scheme funding to local authorities. This review will help inform the Secretary of State's expenditure decisions later in the year.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review, if he will list the assets to be sold over the next three years by the Welsh Office and the National Assembly for Wales. [51469]

Mr. Ron Davies: There are many properties which will be offered for disposal over the next three years. The majority are health service assets and these are listed. Following the merger of the Welsh Development Agency (WDA), Development Board for Rural Wales and the Land Authority for Wales we will receive detailed proposals about accommodation arrangements and these might involve a rationalisation of existing accommodation. Non-Departmental Public Bodies such as the WDA will continue to dispose of sites when appropriate.

Proposed health service property disposals 1998–2001

Health authority	*Property*
Bro Taf	Gelligdeg Clinic
Bro Taf	1 Nevill Street
Bro Taf	Prince of Wales, Rhydlafar
Bro Taf	Ely Hospital
Bro Taf	St. Davids Hospital
Bro Taf	Lansdowne Hospital
Dyfed Powys	Old Fishguard Ambulance Station
Dyfed Powys	Land at Cross Hands
Dyfed Powys	Priority Street Hospital
Dyfed Powys	North Road Hospital, Aberystwyth
Dyfed Powys	Llys Maldwyn
Dyfed Powys	Mid Wales Hospital
Dyfed Powys	St. Davids, Carmarthen
Gwent	Land adjacent to Brynmawr Clinic
Gwent	Former Macey Cwmer Clinic site
Gwent	Former Bargoed Ambulance Station
Gwent	Land at Griffithstown
Gwent	Pontypool and District Hospital
Gwent	Penylan Hospital
Gwent	Llantrechfa Grange (part)
Gwent	Ebbw Vale Hospital
Gwent	Land at Blackwood
Gwent	15 Lodge Road, Caerleon
Morganwg	Varteg Radio Mast
Morganwg	Garth Mor, Neath
Morganwg	Bridgend General Hospital
North Wales	Land at Penrhos Cottage
North Wales	Priory Clinic
North Wales	Broughton Hospital
North Wales	Beaumaris Clinic

Proposed health service property disposals 1998–2001

Health authority	*Property*
North Wales	Llwyn View
North Wales	Groesynyd
North Wales	Blackgridge site
North Wales	Valley Hospital
North Wales	Druid Hospital, Llangefni
North Wales	St. David's Hospital site
North Wales	North Wales Hospital
North Wales	Bala Ambulance Station
North Wales	Dolgarrog Health Centre
North Wales	12 Cae Cilmelyn
North Wales	Land at Cefni
North Wales	Brynyneuadd Farm
WHCSA	Garngoch Stores
WHCSA	Whitchurch Stores

All Wales Ambulance Trust

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what salary will be payable to the new Chief Executive of the All Wales Ambulance Trust. [51417]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The salary will be c£70,000, plus car allowance of £4,000.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49232]

Mr. Ron Davies *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* My Department owns 41 vehicles and leases 16 others. Of these, eight run on unleaded petrol and 49 on diesel.

Engine size (cc)	*Number of vehicles*
1300	1
1400	1
1600	1
1700	2
1800	6
2000	2
2500	10
3900	1
4000	7
4400	1
7000	1
12000	22

Scheduled replacements:

1998–1999: 1

1999–2000: 4

2000–2001: 3

The information for *(b)* is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Clinical Standards

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the development of clinical standards in Wales. [50273]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Measures to improve clinical standards in Wales were set out at the beginning of this year in the White Paper "Putting Patients First". We will shortly be publishing a consultation paper detailing proposals for raising the quality of care and ensuring consistently high standards of clinical excellence. We will do this in partnership with the Royal Colleges and other professional bodies and draw on the work of the Clinical Effectiveness Initiative over the last three years.

Health Care Staff

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps are being taken to protect staff against violence in health care premises in Wales; and what steps are being taken to make occupational health services available to staff in primary care in Wales. [51586]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Tackling violence is one of the main human resource management priorities for the NHS and research is currently being undertaken to identify good practice examples of ways in which violence against staff working in the community can be reduced. This will form the basis of guidance to be issued shortly. Occupational health in primary care is a matter for general practitioners but some health authorities are exploring ways of setting up a service on a local basis.

Occupational Health

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which NHS trusts in Wales have access to an occupational health service; and which of those services are led by a consultant in occupational health. [51587]

Mr. Win Griffiths: All NHS trusts in Wales have access to an occupational health service. Nineteen of the NHS trusts provide their own occupational health service and the remainder contract with other healthcare providers. Of those that have their own occupational health service, ten have direct consultant input and of the remainder four have a Senior Clinical Medical Officer who is fully trained and on the Specialist Register of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine.

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many and what percentage of NHS staff in Wales have access to an occupational health service. [51588]

Mr. Win Griffiths: 100 per cent. of hospital and community based staff have access to an occupational health service, but no information is collected for staff employed in primary care.

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps are being taken to ensure that the guidance, Occupational Health Services for NHS Staff (94)51, is being implemented in each NHS trust in Wales. [51589]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The guidance is not routinely monitored since it is a matter for NHS trusts as employers to ensure that their statutory duties are fulfilled. However, the Department has recently completed a survey and the results will be discussed with trusts over the next few months.

NHS Trusts (Health and Safety)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if health care purchasers are required to stipulate health and safety performance standards in their contracts with NHS trusts. [51590]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Health care purchasers are not required to stipulate health and safety performance standards in their contracts with NHS trusts.

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what duties the NHS Executive has to ensure that Welsh trusts meet the provisions of health and safety legislation. [51591]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The NHS Executive is a part of the Department of Health and has no such remit in Wales. It is the duty of individual trusts to comply with Health and Safety legislation.

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps the NHS Executive is taking to monitor compliance with health and safety legislation by NHS trusts in Wales. [51592]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The NHS Executive is a part of the Department of Health and has no such remit in Wales. The Health and Safety Executive monitor and enforce compliance by all employers, including NHS trusts.

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if NHS trusts are required to include reports on their health and safety record in their annual reports. [51593]

Mr. Win Griffiths: NHS trusts have been asked to provide such information in their Annual Reports for 1997/98.

NHS Employees (Early Retirement)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many NHS employees in Wales have retired early on health grounds in each of the last five years. [51584]

Mr. Win Griffiths: This information is kept by the NHS Pensions Agency but not in the form requested. Information on retirements of all types has been kept on a geographical basis only since April 1997. The figures prior to that date could be obtained only at disproportionate costs and, because of changes to Health Authorities and NHS trusts within that time the Agency could not guarantee their accuracy. In addition, not all NHS employees are in the NHS Pension Scheme and no data are held centrally for these staff.

However, I will write to my hon. Friend setting out the information from April 1997 as soon as possible, and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

TREASURY

Government Policies

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the projects undertaken by his Department since 1 May 1997 to research public reaction to *(a)* Government policies and *(b)* potential new policies; and if he will place the results of the research in the Library. [46685]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* In line with the practice of successive Administrations, the Chancellor's Departments routinely consult the public, interested parties and client groups by way of consultation papers, White Papers and a variety of other avenues on a wide range of policies and proposed legislation. My reply is therefore confined to research studies into public reaction to Government policy or potential new policies.

The projects funded by the Chancellor's Departments since 1 May 1997 to research public reaction to Government policies and potential new policies are as follows:

Self Assessment for tax public information campaign:

To track levels of awareness and understanding of SA; to monitor understanding of the help available from the Inland Revenue to cope with the new system; and developmental research into elements of the campaign.

SA Budget Payment Plans:

Research into taxpayer views on payment methods.

Two alcohol and tobacco smuggling surveys:

To measure public perception and understanding of smuggling; and to assess the potential effectiveness of anti-smuggling publicity strategy proposals.

The results of these surveys have been placed in the Library.

I also refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) on 19 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *303*, and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on 1 July 1998 *Official Report*, column *181*, concerning research into presentational aspects of the individual savings account and the working families tax credit and into various surveys of PEP/TESSA holders.

Pensions

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for assistance in future years for retired people in respect of their fuel bills. [49284]

Mr. Darling: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced to the House on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 703–05, Winter Fuel Bonuses of £20 for every pensioner household in the country will be paid from next year. These are in addition to Cold Weather Payments, which will continue to be paid at the rate of £8.50 a week during periods of cold weather to pensioners receiving Income Support.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50677]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Credit Unions

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many United Kingdom citizens were members of a credit union for each of the last 10 years. [50890]

Mrs. Liddell: The membership of credit unions registered in the United Kingdom was:

Year	*Members*
1988	166,013
1989	182,531
1990	205,534
1991	230,027
1992	262,655
1993	300,677
1994	348,800
1995	390,019
1996	439,726
1997	[1]474,801

[1] Provisional

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total amount invested with credit unions for each of the last 10 years. [50888]

Mrs. Liddell: The total share capital of credit unions registered in the United Kingdom was:

£000

	Total UK shareholding
1988	66,240
1989	76,361
1990	88,997
1991	104,851
1992	128,612
1993	163,639
1994	211,465
1995	263,204
1996	319,886
1997	[1]375,861

[1] Provisional

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many credit unions were registered for each of the last 10 years. [50889]

Mrs. Liddell: The total number of credit unions on the Registers in Great Britain and Northern Ireland was as follows:

Year	*Number*
1988	250
1989	314
1990	397
1991	455
1992	516
1993	573
1994	627
1995	686
1996	715
1997	766

Public-private Partnerships

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from *(a)* the Accountancy Standards Bureau and *(b)* others about the treatment of public-private partnerships in the national accounts. [51511]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 22 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the national accounts.

There have been no representations received by the Accountancy Standards Bureau or others regarding the treatment of public-private partnerships in the national accounts.

Wage Increases

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the quarter-on-quarter increases in wage rates in the private sector, expressed as a percentage of increases in the public sector for each quarter since 1995. [51423]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tim Boswell, dated 22 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on increases in wage rates in the private and public sectors.

I have provided available information, calculated from the monthly Average Earnings Index (AEI), in the attached table. It should be noted that the AEI is a measure of change in gross earnings per head and does not directly measure wage rates. Furthermore, it takes no account of changes in average hours worked, changes in the balance between full-time and part-time employees, nor changes in the proportion of high and low paid employees.

Average earnings index, seasonally adjusted 1990 = 100

	Quarter on quarter increase		*Private sector increase as a % of public sector increase*
	Private Sector	*Public Sector*	
March 1995	0.9	0.6	158
June 1995	1.1	0.5	227
September 1995	0.7	0.6	112
December 1995	1.0	0.6	155
March 1996	1.0	0.8	121
June 1996	1.2	0.7	173
September 1996	1.2	0.3	398
December 1996	1.1	1.1	103
March 1997	1.5	0.4	360
June 1997	0.7	0.7	101
September 1997	1.3	0.8	168
December 1997	1.6	0.8	206
March 1998	2.0	0.3	654

Notes:

Data are rounded to one decimal place

These estimates do not directly measure wage rates. Growth rates can be affected by changes in average hours worked, in the balance between full-time and part-time workers, and in the proportion of high and low paid workers.

Charities

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received regarding the review of tax treatment for charities. [51656]

Dawn Primarolo: There has been an excellent response to the first phase of the Review of Charities' Taxation. Over 3,000 letters were received.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes have been considered as part of the review of the tax treatment of charities. [51725]

Dawn Primarolo: Over 3,000 responses were received to the first phase of the Review of Charities' Taxation. All these contributions are currently being analysed and will inform a public consultation document.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes have been proposed in the review of the tax treatment of charities; and if he will make a statement. [51726]

Dawn Primarolo: No changes have yet been proposed by the Review of Charities' Taxation. Decisions on the scope for change will be taken following a public consultation exercise, due to start later this year.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will provide an analysis of the figures used under Accounting and other adjustments on page 107 of the Comprehensive Spending Review report in each of the years listed in Table A2. [51475]

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement explaining the component parts of the entry entitled Accounting and other adjustments in Table 2 of the Comprehensive Spending Review, Cm. 4011, for (i) 1998–99, (ii) 1999–2000, (iii) 2000–01 and (iv) 2001–02. [51734]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The table provides a breakdown of the accounting and other adjustments shown in table 2 and table A2 of the Comprehensive Spending Review, with accompanying brief explanatory notes.

Accounting and other adjustments in table A2 of the Comprehensive Spending Review

£ billion

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2000–02*
1 Non-trading capital consumption	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.7	3.9	4.3	4.4	4.6	4.8
2 VAT refunds	3.5	4.6	4.8	4.8	4.9	4.9	5.1	5.4	5.6
3 Pension increase payments	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.0
4 Superannuation charges	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.6
5 Income tax credits	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.3	4.1	4.5
6 Other spending in AME	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2
7 Adjustments for Public Corporations	2.1	2.3	2.6	1.6	3.0	3.3	3.6	3.9	4.2
8 Intra-public sector debt interest	–2.6	–2.2	–2.4	–2.3	–2.4	–2.2	–2.1	–2.1	–2.0
9 Capital transfer receipts	–0.2	–0.1	–0.2	–0.2	–0.2	–0.2	–0.2	–0.2	–0.2
10 Financial transactions in DEL and AME	–0.5	0.7	1.8	1.8	–0.2	–0.9	–1.0	–1.4	–1.6
11 Other accounting adjustments	–0.6	–0.2	0.0	–0.4	0.4	–0.3	–0.2	–0.1	–0.1
Total	8.6	12.1	13.8	13.2	13.7	13.4	15.3	18.8	20.0

Notes:

1. Adds the value of general government non-trading capital consumption
2. Removes the deduction of VAT refunded to central government departments and local government. Departmental Expenditure Limits and Annually Managed Expenditure programme expenditure is measured net of these refunds, while Total Managed Expenditure is recorded including the VAT paid. Adds VAT refunded to NHS trusts, BBC and ITN in respect of contracted out services for non-business purposes. Also adds VAT refunds to DIY housebuilders
3. Adds the pension increase elements of the pensions paid to members of the teachers and National Health Service superannuation schemes
4. Deducts the accruing superannuation liability charges for the civil service, armed forces and security and intelligence services superannuation schemes, and adds pensions in payment
5. Adds income tax credits which score as public expenditure under current national accounting conventions—largely payments to non-taxpayers. Includes parts of Mortgage Interest Relief, Life Assurance Premium Relief, and (from 1999–2000) Working Families' Tax Credit and Disabled Persons' Tax Credit
6. Includes the Valuation Office and Financial Services Authority
7. Accounting adjustments to move to a national accounts basis for scoring public corporations current and capital spending; adds capital expenditure and debt interest payments outside the public sector and removes capital grants from general government
8. Removes intra-public sector debt interest and dividend payments and receipts which are included elsewhere in Departmental Expenditure Limits and Annually Managed Expenditure
9. Deducts public sector capital transfer receipts, which are netted off in Total Managed Expenditure
10. Deducts those financial transactions which are scored in Departmental Expenditure Limits and Annually Managed Expenditure
11. Other adjustments include, amongst others, the deduction of grants paid to local authorities by non-departmental public bodies classified to the central government sector and the inclusion of licence fees and visa receipts netted off in Departmental Expenditure Limits

National Savings

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment his Department has made of the performance of EDS and Siemens Business Services in public sector outsourcing contracts; [51439]

(2) what are the figures for the number of staff in National Savings operational services who have taken *(a)* early retirement and *(b)* voluntary redundancy in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97 and (iii) 1997–98; [51434]

(3) what proportion of staff in National Savings operational services were on *(a)* fixed-term contracts

and *(b)* part-time contracts in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97 and (iii) 1997–98; [51430]

(4) what was the number of full-time equivalent staff in National Savings operational services in *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98; [51433]

(5) what level of reduction in staffing in National Savings operational services is included in the Business Process Re-engineering Plan; [51432]

(6) what is the timetable for implementation of the Business Process Re-engineering plan in National Savings. [51431]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answers 20 July 1998]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive for National Savings. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51439 about what assessment the Agency has made of the performance of EDS and Siemens Business Services in public sector outsourcing contracts.

National Savings has gained a detailed knowledge of EDS and Siemens Business Services' performance in the areas of contractual compliance, behaviour towards transferring staff and business performance. In addition to financial and published analysis, NS has gained information from over 30 public sector organisations who are, or have been, receiving services from one or other of these companies. A wide range of private sector customers has also been approached, and CCTA have provided us with intelligence reports on both firms.

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51434 about the number of staff in National Savings Operational Services who have taken early retirement and voluntary redundancy in 1995–96, 1996–97

Staff surpluses over the period 1995–96 to 1997–98 led to the release, on redundancy terms, of 735 individuals in total. The table below gives the figures for each year for the two relevant categories: early release and voluntary severance.

	Early retirement (50 and over)	*Voluntary severance (under 50)*
1995–96	268	317
1996–97	32	117
1997–98	1	0
Total	301	434

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51430 about the proportion of staff in National Savings Operational Services on Fixed Term contracts and part-time contracts in 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98.

The number of staff in National Savings during thee periods were:

Fixed Term Contracts

1 April 1995: 1.1%

1 April 1996: 1.8%

1 April 1997: 2.0%

1 April 1998: 1.7%

Casual Contracts

1 April 1995: 2.2%

1 April 1996: 0.2%

1 April 1997: 0.8%

1 April 1998: 1.1%

In addition the total number of permanent staff employed on a part-time basis during these periods was:

1 April 1995: 286 (6.1% of total full time equivalent staff)

1 April 1996: 265 (6.8% of total full time equivalent staff)

1 April 1997: 241 (6.7% of total full time equivalent staff)

1 April 1998: 235 (6.8% of total full time equivalent staff).

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51433 about the number of full time equivalent staff in National Savings Operational Services in 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98.

The number of full time equivalent staff in National Savings during these periods was:

1 April 1995: 4,633

1 April 1996: 3,876

1 April 1997: 3,548

1 April 1998: 3,450

these figures include full and part-time permanent staff, staff on Fixed Term Appointments and those employed on casual contracts.

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51432 about the level of reduction in staffing in National Savings Operational Services included in the Business Re-engineering Plan.

National Savings has an extensive programme of operational improvement, which will significantly reduce manpower needs over the next few years. The Business Process Re-engineering elements of the programme are expected to realise savings of some 800 posts.

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 22 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51431 about the timetable for implementation of the Business Process Re-engineering plan in National Savings.

Implementation of Business Process Re-engineering within National Savings is scheduled to begin in November 1998 and to be completed in the Year 2000.

EU Price Discrepancies

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects the European Commission to complete its investigation into price discrepancies for goods within the EU initiated at the York meeting of ECOFIN. [51667]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The European Commission are developing an extended scoreboard of indicators of effective market integration including price differentials, as set out in the Broad Economic Guidelines report agreed at the Cardiff European Council on 15 to 16 June. The Government expect the Commission to report on its work on price differentials at the Cologne European Council at the end of Germany's Presidency of the EU in spring 1999.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Drift Nets

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will publish the outcome of research into the catching of non-target species cetaceans by the tuna drift net fishing industry; [50405]

(2) what research his Department has undertaken to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the use of sonar equipment to deter cetaceans from swimming into tuna drift nets. [50406]

Mr. Morley: A study of the cetacean bycatch in the UK tuna drift net fishery in 1995 was deposited in the Library of the House in December 1995. The refusal of drift net fishermen to co-operate prevented a follow-up study taking place.

The Ministry has not undertaken research on the use of sonar equipment on tuna drift nets.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50683]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Marine Pollution

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent monitoring his Department has carried out in known explosive dumping grounds to establish the levels of contamination of the marine environment. [51160]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The Department does not carry out any monitoring specifically in relation to munitions dumpsites. However, an extensive programme of monitoring for a wide range of contaminants is carried out in the seas around England and Wales. The results of this are published annually and copies placed in the Library of the House.

EU Agriculture Council

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 20 July; and if he will make a statement. [52143]

Dr. John Cunningham: I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of the European Union Council of Agriculture Ministers in Brussels on 20 July 1998.

The Austrian Presidency introduced its programme of work for the Council, the centrepieces of which are Agenda 2000 including wine reform, reform of the agrimonetary regime and animal welfare legislation.

In a debate on the Presidency's detailed plans for Agenda 2000, I welcomed their intention to press ahead with the negotiations in accordance with the timetable laid down by the Cardiff European Council, urging them to include detailed discussions on member states' ideas on the future of dairy quotas and compensatory aids and the application of subsidiarity to the proposed ceiling on direct payments to farmers.

During a brief discussion of the proposed reform of the agrimonetary regime, I stressed the need for equitable treatment between those countries entering the Single Currency next year and those not doing so, and for an early decision which would enable our farmers and traders ample time to prepare for introduction of the new regime on 1 January 1999.

In a debate on a possible EU trade agreement with the Mercusor countries and Chile, on which a Commission proposal is expected shortly, I noted the economic advantages which such agreement could open up, whilst drawing attention to the need to avoid complications in relation to the negotiations on Agenda 2000, the forthcoming WTO Round and EU enlargement. The Commission's proposal should be judged on its merits against this background.

Performance Targets

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what key performance targets Agriculture Ministers have set the Intervention Board for 1998–99. [52144]

Dr. John Cunningham: In agreement with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, I have set the following targets for 1998–99:

	Target
Percentage of claims processed within deadlines	99.0%
Percentage of claims processed correctly	98.5%
Cumulative running cost efficiency gains	2.5%
Improvement in index of productivity	4.0%
Ratio of disallowance to EAGGF funds handled	0.4%
To maintain expenditure within vote provision, cash and running cost limits	
New value for money savings in procurement of goods and services	7.0%
Yield: cost ratio of anti-fraud activities	3.0:1.0

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he will take to safeguard GMO trials from interference by third parties. [51458]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The responsibility for safeguarding field trials of genetically modified organisms lies with the holder of the consent issued by the Secretary of State under the relevant legislation.

The police are investigating these incidents when requested to do so by the company concerned. Officials in my Department are co-operating fully with the police inquiries.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average housing benefit paid to households in Cheltenham for *(a)* local authority properties, *(b)* housing association properties and *(c)* privately rented accommodation. [50051]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is set out in the table.

Average weekly housing benefit by tenure paid by Cheltenham Borough Council November 1997

	Average weekly amounts of Housing Benefit (£)
Local Authority Tenants	43.00
Private Tenants	57.00
Housing Association Tenants	47.40

Notes:

1. The average amounts shown are for benefit units which may be a single person or a couple
2. The amounts have been rounded to the nearest ten pence
3. For this analysis private tenants exclude housing association tenants, who are shown separately

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System, 100 per cent. caseload counts with and without Income Support, taken at the end of November 1997

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the impact of rent caps for housing benefit purposes on rent levels. [51803]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We are assessing the impact of the Local Reference Rent and Single Room Rent restrictions on claimants, landlords and the private rental market as a whole. We are gathering information from a variety of sources to make that assessment.

Pensions

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if she will state in respect of each financial year since 1990 *(a)* the level of the basic state retirement pension, *(b)* the level of the basic state retirement pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p and *(c)* the level of the basic state retirement pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 1p; [50621]

(2) what is her estimate of the additional cost to public funds of uprating the basic state retirement pension and the married woman's pension each year if rounding up *(a)* to the nearest 5p and *(b)* to the nearest 1p the percentage increase; [50623]

(3) if she will state in respect of each financial year since 1990 *(a)* the level of the married woman's pension, *(b)* the level of that pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p and *(c)* the level of that pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 1p; [50622]

(4) what is her estimate of the net additional cost to public funds in each financial year since 1990 if the basic state retirement pension and the married woman's pension had been uprated each year by rounding the percentage increase up *(a)* to the nearest 5p and *(b)* to the nearest 1p. [50624]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 July 1998]:* The information is set out in the tables.

Level of the basic State Retirement Pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p and the nearest 1p from 1990

£ per week

	(a)	*(b)*	*(c)*
1990–91	46.90	46.95	46.92
1991–92	52.00	52.10	52.04
1992–93	54.15	54.25	54.18
1993–94	56.10	56.25	56.14
1994–95	57.60	57.80	57.66
1995–96	58.85	59.10	58.93
1996–97	61.15	61.45	61.23
1997–98	62.45	62.75	62.52
1998–99	64.70	65.05	64.78

Notes:

1. All amounts are in cash terms
2. *(a)* The level of the basic State Retirement Pension since 1990

(b) The level of the basic State Retirement Pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p

(c) The level of the basic State Retirement Pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 1p

There would be no additional cost to public funds in 1998–99 of uprating the basic Retirement Pension and married woman's pension to the nearest 5p and 1p. (The unrounded rates for 1998–99 are £64.6982 for the category A Retirement Pension and £38.6946 for the category B Retirement Pension for married women. The actual rates are £64.70 and £38.70 respectively).

Level of the married women's pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p and the nearest 1p from 1990

£ per week

	(a)	*(b)*	*(c)*
1990–91	28.20	28.20	28.20
1991–92	31.25	31.30	31.28
1992–93	32.55	32.60	32.57
1993–94	33.70	33.80	33.75
1994–95	34.50	34.65	34.56
1995–96	35.25	35.45	35.33
1996–97	36.60	36.85	36.71
1997–98	37.35	37.65	37.49
1998–99	38.70	39.05	38.84

Notes:

1. All amounts are in cash terms
2. *(a)* The level of the married woman's pension since 1990

(b) The level of the married woman's pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 5p

(c) The level of the married woman's pension if upratings had always been made upwards to the nearest 1p

Net additional cost to public funds in each financial year since 1990 if the basic State Retirement Pension and the married woman's pension had been uprated each year by rounding the percentage increase up to the nearest 5p

£ million

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
(i) Gross Cost (RP only)	19	44	44	69	92	118	145	152	180
Means-tested benefit offset	–5	–11	–11	–17	–23	–29	–36	–38	–45
Net Cost	15	33	33	52	69	88	108	114	135
(ii) Gross Cost (including linked benefits)	23	54	55	86	116	146	176	183	215
Means-tested benefit offset	–6	–14	–14	–22	–29	–37	–44	–46	–54
Net Cost	17	40	41	64	87	110	132	138	161

Net additional cost to the public funds in each financial year since 1990 if the basic State Retirement Pension and the married woman's pension had been uprated each year by rounding the percentage increase up to the nearest 1p

£ million

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
(i) Gross Cost (RP only)	8	19	14	21	29	39	43	42	47
Means-tested benefit offset	–2	–5	–3	–5	–7	–10	–11	–11	–12
Net Cost	6	14	10	15	22	29	32	32	35
(ii) Gross Cost (including linked benefits)	9	22	17	25	36	47	51	49	54
Means-tested benefit offset	–2	–6	–4	–6	–9	–12	–13	–12	–14
Net cost	7	17	13	19	27	35	38	37	41

Notes:
1. All estimates are rounded to the nearest £1 million. Totals may not agree due to rounding
2. National Insurance Fund benefit costs were estimated by the Government Actuary's Department
3. For tables marked *(i)*, the gross cost does not include the cost of uprating linked benefits (Widows Benefits, Incapacity Benefit, Non-contributory Retirement Pension, Industrial Death Benefit) in the same way as the contributory Retirement Pension. For tables marked *(ii)*, the gross cost does include the cost of uprating these linked benefits
4. Means-tested benefit offsets were calculated using the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey and the May 1996 Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, both uprated to 1998–99 prices, benefits and earnings levels, and calibrated to the forecasts underlying the 1998 Departmental Report

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are in receipt of state retirement pension in the United Kingdom. [50953]

Mr. Denham: The information is set out in the table.

	Male	*Female*
Great Britain	3,583,000	6,387,000
United Kingdom	3,664,000	6,540,000

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand
Sources:
For Great Britain, 5 per cent. sample from the Pension Strategy Computer System, as at March 1998
For Norther Ireland, 100 per cent. sample from the Pension Strategy Computer System, as at March 1998

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women over the age of 100 years are in receipt of the state retirement pension in the United Kingdom. [50905]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

	Male	*Female*
Great Britain	1,000	7,000
United Kingdom	1,000	7,000

Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand
Source:
National Population Projections supplied by the Government Actuary's Department for mid-year 1998

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the increases for the poorest pensioners will be a net increase; and if he will make a statement on the implications for housing benefit payments arising from increases. [51821]

Mr. Denham: From next April, Income Support rates will be increased to give the poorest pensioners a guaranteed minimum income of £75 per week for a single person. Couples and older pensioners will receive more: the full details of the increases are shown in the table.

Existing recipients, and pensioners who become entitled to Income Support as a result of these changes, will qualify for maximum eligible Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Those with income above the new levels will also benefit, as the increases in the Income Support rates will apply in the calculation of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, resulting in a reduction in the amount of income taken into account.

New Income Support rates from April 1999

£

	Age 60–74	*Age 75–79*	*Age 80+*[1]
Single pensioners now	70.45	72.70	77.55
Single pensioners from April 1999	75.00	77.30	82.25
Couples now	109.35	112.55	117.90
Couples from April 1999	116.60	119.85	125.30

[1] Also paid to younger pensioners with disabilities

Child Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the average housing cost included in the protected income of absent parents under the current child support formula; [50712]

(2) what is the average amount of housing cost included in the protected income of absent parents with incomes under £200 per week. [50711]

Mr. Keith Bradley: As at 28 February 1998, the latest date for which information is available, the average amount of housing costs included in the protected income of a non-resident parent was £44.23 per week. For those cases where the net income of the non-resident parent is under £200 per week the amount was £36.66 per week.

Non-resident parents have a responsibility to support their children, including paying for their upkeep.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate how many, and what proportion of, absent parents would pay more maintenance under the formula for assessing maintenance proposed in the Green Paper on Child Support than they do currently broken down into those earning (i) £0 to £99, (ii) £100 to £149, (iii) £150 to £199, (iv) £200 to £249, (v) £250 to £299 and (vi) £300 to £400 per week. [50709]

Mr. Keith Bradley: All non-resident parents have a responsibility to support their children, including paying for their upkeep. We estimate that around 70 per cent. of non-resident parents will have a lower maintenance assessment under the proposals for a simpler formula set out in the Green Paper "Children First: a new approach" (Cm 3992).

The information requested on those facing a higher assessment is in the table.

Gross income (£/week)	*Numbers with higher assessed liability (000s)*	*Percentage*
Under £100	0	0
£100-£149	20	5
£150-£199	25	7
£200-£249	20	6
£250-£299	10	3
£300-£400	10	3
Over £400	5	1
All	90	25

Notes:

1. Figures provided are for all those non-resident parents who are not in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. The percentage figures show these as a proportion of all these non benefit non-resident parents
2. Estimates are based on the 1997–98 caseload
3. Figures rounded to the nearest 5000 and therefore may not sum

These figures relate to assessed liability and not to amounts actually being paid. Changes in liability will be phased in.

The Green Paper also proposes that most of the current provisions for exemption from the minimum payment should be abolished. We estimate, in current terms, that this would result in an additional 60,000 non-resident parents becoming liable for the minimum payment.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if letters to hon. Members in the name of the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency are signed personally by her. [51568]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Mr. David Winnick, dated 21 July 1998:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the letters from Honourable Members to the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency.

I should explain first that many Members prefer to write direct to the head of the local Business Unit directly responsible for the case in question, or to follow up questions through the dedicated MP help lines which we have set up in each of our Centres. That approach minimises delay where action is needed to resolve an individuals problem. I have asked for regular reports to be prepared for senior managers and for me, summarising main types and causes of such problems in order to ensure that, wherever possible, action is also taken over time to improve our general systems and training so as to minimise their re-occurrence.

Where Members prefer to write to myself the Parliamentary Correspondence Unit handle all my Parliamentary post and ensure deadlines are observed or urgent cases identified to give a rapid response.

In the majority of cases my Correspondence Unit will refer the letter to the relevant Business Unit or specialist central unit within the agency to provide the level of detail required to complete a response. Increasingly we expect the Unit to contact the Members office by telephone proactively where this may help to ensure that the problem is resolved as quickly as possible.

Once a final response has been prepared, this and the supporting background information are checked by managers fully accountable to me to ensure all points raised are covered and the response is factually and legally correct. I personally check the quality of responses regularly and I recently instituted a formal review of them during which a sample of 48 Members were asked about their style and usefulness. As a result of that feedback we intend to undertake an exercise over the next year to make those replies more personalised, briefer and more in "Plain English", and to further review the arrangements for their signature. At present some of those letters are personally signed by myself. In order to avoid excessive delay (during my necessary absence on other business) others are signed on my behalf either electronically by my Correspondence Unit; or by senior members of my management Board under formal delegation.

I hope this is helpful.

Income Support

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if she will set out the terms of reference of each of the reviews in which the future of the income support residential care allowance is being considered; [51138]

(2) if she will list the reviews in which the future of the income support residential allowance is being considered; and when she expects each of these reviews to be completed; and when she expects to announce their conclusions. [51137]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government have established an independent Royal Commission to consider the future funding of long-term care and to make recommendations. Issues such as benefit provision for people in residential care fall within the scope of the Royal Commission's deliberations. The Royal Commission will report at the end of the year.

We have also asked officials to consider whether the residential allowance is meeting objectives for community care. This is not a formal review with specific terms of reference and work is at an early stage. It is too early to give an indication as to whether, or when, changes will be introduced.

Crisis Loan Scheme

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the total amount of money given under the crisis loan scheme by her Department during the last 12 months. [51244]

Mr. Denham: Gross expenditure on crisis loans during the last financial year, 1997–98, was £54 million.

Full details of Social Fund expenditure during 1997–98 were published on 22 July in the Annual Report by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the availability of *(a)* stationery and *(b)* printed forms at Benefits Agency offices; and if she will make a statement. [51563]

Mr. Keith Bradley: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Keith Bradley, dated 21 July 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what assessment has been made of the availability of (a) stationery and (b) printed forms at Benefits Agency (BA) offices.

On 6 April 1998, a new system was introduced for ordering forms, leaflets and envelopes called the Customer Direct Initiative (CDI). The intention behind CDI is to reduce the cost of print and storage by introducing a direct service to the customer and placing ownership of stock with suppliers.

There have been some initial problems with the new system which has led to BA offices experiencing difficulties in obtaining forms and printed material. We have been working closely with suppliers to address these early problems and improvements are now being seen, such as the increased availability of stock to between 88% and 97% of the total requested and the continued reduction in supply chain problems. We expect these improvements to continue but will manage the situation carefully so that we can be satisfied that the system is working properly.

In addition, we have identified forms and stationery that are essential for our core business and suppliers have given assurances that these products will always be available and this position is being monitored daily.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Lone Parents

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents in Kilmarnock and Loudoun were on income support in the periods *(a)* May 1995 to 1996, *(b)* May 1996 to 1997 and *(c)* May 1997 to 1998. [51631]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of Social Security benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Desmond Browne, dated 21 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many lone parents in Kilmarnock and Loudoun were on Income Support (IS) in the periods May 1995 to 1996, May 1996 to 1997 and May 1997 to 1998.

The information is not available in the format requested. The Benefits Agency (BA) collates IS statistics by BA District. These Districts do not correspond to constituency boundaries, Local Authority areas or specific geographical areas.

Such information as is available is provided in the attached annex. It relates to the BA's South West Scotland District which is made up of offices in Irvine, Kilmarnock, Ayr, Dumfries and Stranraer. The information is provisional and may be subject to change.

I hope that this is helpful.

Number of lone parents on Income Support in BA's SW Scotland District

Year	*May*	*August*	*November*	*February*
1995	9,610	9,804	9,581	9,673
1996	9,660	9,842	9,575	9,609
1997	9,649	9,712	9,363	9,401
1998	9,322	—	—	—

The figures represent only those lone parents who are in receipt of the lone parent rate of family premium.

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the number of lone parents in Kilmarnock and Loudoun who have taken up in-work benefits in the periods *(a)* May 1995 to 1996, *(b)* May 1996 to 1997, *(c)* May 1997 to 1998 and *(d)* May 1998 to July 1998. [51630]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of in work benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Desmond Browne, dated 21 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking for an estimate of the number of lone parent families in Kilmarnock and Loudoun who have taken up in work benefits in the periods (a) May 1995 to 1996, (b) May 1996 to 1997, (c) May 1997 to 1998 and (d) May 1998 to July 1998.

The information is not available in the format requested. In work benefits, namely Family Credit (FC) and Disability Working Allowance (DWA), are administered centrally by the Benefits Agency's (BA) Income Related Benefits Directorate based at Preston.

Statistics are produced on a national basis and provide a snapshot of the number of families in receipt of FC or DWA within a particular BA office area at a given date. These statistics do not provide a breakdown of the numbers of single and two parent families in receipt of the benefits. However, national figures indicate that 53% of all recipients of FC and DWA are single parent families.

Using the above information, the details provided below estimate the number of single and two parent families in receipt of in work benefits in Kilmarnock at the dates shown.

Date	FC/DWA lone parent awards	FC/DWA two parent awards
July 1995	704	625
August 1996	795	705
August 1997	811	720
April 1998	795	706

I hope this information is useful.

Social Fund

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what proportion of the Social Fund has been taken up by administration costs in each of the last five years; [51443]

(2) how much was allocated under the Social Fund in the form of *(a)* loans and *(b)* community care grants in each of the last five years in (i) Coventry and (ii) the West Midlands. [51445]

Mr. Denham: The administration of the Social Fund is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 21 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what proportion of the Social Fund (SF) has been taken up by administration costs in each of the last five years, and how much was allocated under the SF for loans and community care grants (CCGs) in each of the last five years in Coventry and the West Midlands.

No proportion of the SF is taken up by administration costs. The administration of the SF scheme is an integral element of the Benefit's Agency (BA)'s overall staffing and development costs. A breakdown of those related to the SF is detailed in Annex 1. However, you may be interested to know that, from April 1999, there is provision for the introduction of a new, discrete and simplified SF Budgeting Loan scheme. This will bring tangible benefits to customers as well as the prospect of real efficiencies and reductions in administrative costs.

Information on SF allocations in Coventry and the West Midlands is not available in the format requested because BA District and Area boundaries are not co-terminus with those of Local Authorities or Parliamentary constituencies. The BA's Midlands Area Directorate is made up of the Birmingham Chamberlain, Birmingham Heartlands, Birmingham North West, Birmingham North East, Birmingham South East, Birmingham South West, Coventry, Hereford and Worcester, and Warwickshire Districts. In addition, because of a reduction in the number of BA Area Directorates nationally, the Districts of Wolverhampton, Shires, Sandwell, and Walsall were added to the Midlands Area Directorate in 1996.

Information on the grant and loan allocation for the Midlands Area Directorate and the Coventry district are displayed in Annex 2. Current and historical details of grant and loan allocations for all BA Districts are available in the Library.

I hope that this is helpful.

Cost of administering the Social Fund for Great Britain

Year	Cost (£)
1992–93	[1]208,000,000
1993–94	[2]270,000,000
1994–95	209,000,000
1995–96	195,200,000
1996–97	180,000,000

[1] 1992–93 includes a £17 million investment in the Social Fund Computer System (SFCS)
[2] 1993–94 includes a £45 million investment in the successful roll out of SFCS

Budget allocation—Midlands Area Directorate

Date	Grants	Loans
1993–94	4,794,143	12,349,870
1994–95	4,891,466	12,600,509
1995–96	4,891,466	15,519,029
1996–97	7,944,138	25,710,886
1997–98	7,944,138	28,896,070
1998–99	8,031,997	31,912,071

Notes:
1. Five BA Districts were added to the Midlands Area Directorate in 1996–97
2. The Community Care Grants Budget was increased by one million pounds nationally for 1998–99

Budget allocation—Coventry District

Date	Grants	Loans
1993–94	673,671	1,810,773
1994–95	687,347	1,847,495
1995–96	687,347	2,171,962
1996–97	687,347	2,321,744
1997–98	687,347	2,684,795
1998–99	694,949	3,014,815

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the levels of fraud in applications to the Social Fund; and what measures are proposed to eliminate fraud. [51444]

Mr. Field: Tackling fraud and abuse is a top priority for the Government and part of the Government's intention to deliver a first class "pukka" service. The Social Security Act 1998 contains measures that will enable discretionary Social Fund payments obtained through misrepresentation or failure to disclose a material fact to be recovered by deductions from prescribed benefits. This legislative change, which will be introduced later this year, will close a loophole that has allowed some people to benefit from fraud.

Assessment of the levels of fraud in Social Fund applications is the responsibility of Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 21 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what assessment she has made of the levels of fraud in applications to the Social Fund (SF); and what measures are proposed to eliminate fraud.

The Benefits Agency (BA)'s Benefit Review Programme aims to measure how much benefit is being paid incorrectly (including fraud) and establish causes of incorrect payments. So far Benefit Reviews have been carried out on Income Support, Unemployment Benefit, Housing Benefit, Retirement Pension, Invalid Care

Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Child Benefit, but not on the SF. Therefore, no formal assessment has been made of the level of fraud in SF applications.

During 1995, as part of the risk management work carried out by the BA, an exercise was undertaken on known weaknesses within the SF processes, both IT and clerical. This resulted in the formation of a Security Action Plan for SF, which seeks to address these risks and take account of any new ones that come to light. The plan has been reviewed regularly up to November 1997 and has resulted in several risks and weaknesses being removed.

The Government takes fraud against the Social Security system very seriously. The Green Paper *Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: Securing the Future*, published by the Secretary of State on 13 July 1998, set out a comprehensive approach to tackling fraud, and as part of our work to deliver it we are looking at our future work programme, including Benefit Reviews, which help inform our knowledge on the nature and scale of fraud and incorrectness.

I hope that this is helpful.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she will publish her annual report on The Social Fund for 1997–98 and the Social Fund Commissioner's annual report; and if she will make a statement. [52142]

Mr. Denham: The Secretary of State's annual report on the Social Fund for 1997–98 (CM4003) was published today and has been laid before Parliament.

The report records that total gross expenditure in 1997–98 was £520.5 million. This included almost two million non-repayable grants and interest free loans worth £462 million and 48 thousand funeral payments, 197 thousand maternity payments and 55 thousand cold weather payments worth a total of £58.6 million. In addition, seven million pensioner households received winter fuel payments worth nearly £200 million.

The report also looks ahead to the changes contained in the Social Security Act 1998 which support our aim of an active modern service. These include the introduction, in 1999, of a fact-based budgeting loan scheme that will be simpler, fairer, easier for applicants to understand and quicker for staff to operate. Decisions under the simplified scheme will be more transparent as they will be based on a common set of specified personal circumstances.

The Social Fund Commissioner's annual report has also been published today and copies placed in the Library.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she will publish the first annual report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate; and if she will make a statement. [52145]

Ms Harman: I have today published the first annual report by the Director General of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI).

Countering fraud is high on the Government's agenda. The green paper published last week, "Beating Fraud is everyone's business: Securing the future" (CM4012), sets out our overall strategy for tackling fraud. The fight against fraud is not just about investigating and detecting fraud when it happens; it is about stopping it getting into the system in the first place. The BFI, which I launched on 5 November, has a unique role to play here in driving up standards, by ensuring that DSS agencies and local authorities are doing their job properly, by actively promoting good working practices and in contributing to future policy development.

This new organisation is still at an early stage in its development but this first year has been one of significant achievement. BFI has established teams of inspectors based at four separate sites and its inspection process has been developed and rigorously tested in a programme of trial inspections, including work in the Benefits Agency. The report of the first live inspection of Blackpool Borough Council, published earlier this year, made valuable recommendations on a range of counter-fraud activities, especially highlighting improvements in work aimed at combating Housing Benefit fraud by landlords.

Copies of the published BFI Annual Report are available in the Library. Further copies are available on request.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 23 July 1998

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Director of Public Prosecutions

Maria Eagle: To ask the Attorney-General when the Director of Public Prosecutions will publish her annual report. [52517]

The Attorney-General: The Director of Public Prosecutions has today published her annual report and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Government Lawyers

Mr. Cranston: To ask the Attorney-General if he will make a statement on the role of Government lawyers in England and Wales. [52368]

The Attorney-General: Lawyers employed by the Government have a central role in assisting Ministers in the discharge of their functions. They are civil servants, and are accountable to Ministers, but nevertheless they are professionally independent and have responsibilities to the Courts and their professional bodies. In recognition of the special nature of the work of Government lawyers, and in consultation with the Treasury Solicitor, I have decided to publish a Guidance Note concerning their role.

The Note provides guidance to Government lawyers as to:

1. The inter-relationship between their obligation as civil servants and as members of the legal profession;
2. Their role regarding other civil servants and the Ministers or office-holders to whom they are accountable.
3. The special position of prosecutors in the decision-making process; and
4. The inter-relationship between the role of Legal Advisers to Departments and that of the Law Officers in the provision of legal advice to the Government.

I am placing a copy of the Guidance Note in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49225]

The Attorney-General *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* This answer covers the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers, the Treasury Solicitor's Department (and the Government Property Lawyers Agency), the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office.

(i) The Government Car and Despatch Agency owns vehicles used by this Department and I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *446*.

(ii) In addition, the Crown Prosecution Service leases a total of 33 vehicles; 26 of which have diesel engines and 7 have unleaded petrol engines. The engine cubic capacities for these vehicles are as set out.

c.c.	*Number of vehicles*
1300	1
1400	3
1500	1
1600	3
1700	7
1800	12
1900	3
2400	1
2400	3

13 vehicles fall due for replacement in 1998–99, 12 in 1999–2000 and 8 in 2000–2001.

DEFENCE

Correspondence

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's average response time to correspondence from members of the public; and how such response times are monitored. [48665]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *159*.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what target his Department sets for the maximum time to respond to letters from hon. Members; what proportion of letters meets that target; and what is the average time taken to respond to a letter from an hon. Member. [49847]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1*.

Executive Agency Newsletters

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the current security classifications of the newsletter produced for the staff of *(a)* the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency, *(b)* the Army Training and Recruiting Agency and *(c)* the Defence Codification Agency; how often each newsletter is produced; and when each newsletter was first produced. [51133]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executives of the Agencies concerned. I have asked them to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from K. A. Bradshaw to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 23 July 1998:

Defence Codification Newsletter—DCA News

1. I am replying to your question to the Secretary for Defence about the newsletter produced by the Defence Codification Agency (DCA), as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive DCA.

2. The Agency publishes a newsletter called 'DCA NEWS'. This is a document which is published quarterly, it has no classified information content and therefore carries no protective marking. The first issue was dated June 1994.

Letter from P. D. Foxton to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 23 July 1998:

I am replying to the recent questions you tabled to the Secretary of State for Defence for those matters that fall within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Army Base Supply and Distribution Agency (ABSDA). You asked about the current security classification of the Agency newsletter produced for the staff, how often it is produced and when the first edition was produced.

The ABSDA staff newsletter, "Baseline", does not have or require any security caveat and it is produced on a bi-monthly basis. The first edition was produced in January 1995, three months prior to the formation of ABSDA, to inform staff of the changes that were to take place.

I trust I have answered your questions satisfactorily.

Letter from P. A. Wilson to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 23 July 1998:

I am replying on behalf of the Chief Executive to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the classification and frequency of publication of the newsletter produced by this Agency, as this matter falls within the responsibility of the Army Training and Recruiting Agency.

The Agency produces a bi-monthly publication, ATRA News, which is unclassified. The first edition was published in April 1997.

Asset Sales

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the proceeds of asset sales by his Department have been offset against the estimates of total defence spending published in paragraph 197 of the Strategic Defence Review; [50845]

(2) what are the assumed receipts from asset sales by his Department in each of the years 1998–99 to 2001–02; [50844]

(3) if the figures in paragraph 197 of the Strategic Defence Review for total defence spending reflect the deduction of the proceeds of asset sales. [50846]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* The future provision for defence, set out in paragraph 197 of the Strategic Defence Review White Paper, reflects forecast receipts from a continuing programme of asset sales. This includes defence estate disposals, receipts from which should exceed £700 million over the next four years. Additional one-off receipts are expected to be available in 2001–02. Details of assumed receipts form part of my Department's internal plans: these represent projections and assumptions which inform advice to Ministers on the affordability of the defence programme. Accordingly, I am withholding the information requested under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Joint Defence Centre

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Joint Defence Centre will be co-located with the Joint Services Command and Staff College; [51300]

(2) if *(a)* the Commandant of the Joint Defence Centre and *(b)* the Commandant of the Joint Service Command and Staff College will be required to have attended the Higher Command and Staff Course; [51294]

(3) what savings will be achieved in single service doctrine centres by the establishment of the Joint Defence Centre; [51295]

(4) who the Commandant of the Joint Defence Centre will report to in the chain of command; [51296]

(5) what are the projected costs of the Joint Defence Centre. [51299]

Mr. George Robertson: *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* Following the Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999) I have established a study team to consider the detailed responsibilities, organisation, location, resources and costs associated with the formation of a Joint Defence Centre. The team is due to report at the end of the year. It would be premature to comment in advance of their findings.

The work of the Joint Defence Centre will be overseen at the highest level; detailed arrangements for the command and management of the centre are also being examined by the study team.

I intend that the Joint Defence Centre will be central to development of our joint Service vision and integral to our strategic planning process. As such I place greatest emphasis on the experience and calibre of those appointed to command and staff the centre, as I would for any officer holding a key joint appointment.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the projected cost of the construction of the Joint Services Command and Staff College at Shrivenham. [51298]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* Defence Management (Watchfield) Ltd. is contracted to provide a complete service in support of the teaching and accommodation facilities at the JSCSC at Watchfield, for which it will be paid a monthly service charge on the basis of usage. The Net Present Value of the payments is assessed to be about £200M over the 30 year contract period. My Department does not make a specific payment to cover construction costs.

RAF Northolt

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received concerning the future of RAF Northolt; and if he will list them. [51755]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on 18 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *264*.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies his Department has *(a)* made and *(b)* evaluated relating to the use of RAF Northolt as a possible feeder or reliever airport for Heathrow Airport. [51201]

Dr. Reid: The Ministry of Defence has neither undertaken nor evaluated any studies relating to the use of RAF Northolt as a possible feeder or reliever airport for Heathrow Airport.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many flights other than RAF flights have used RAF Northolt in the last five years; and if he will list them by category. [51203]

Dr. Reid: The information that my hon. Friend requested for the period 1993 to 1997 is set out in the tables. The figures shown are the number of movements, where one movement is defined as an aircraft either landing or taking off. Until 1995 information was collated only in terms of military and civil movements as shown in the first table. Since 1996, military movements at RAF Northolt have been further sub-categorised as RAF, other military, or civil aircraft on Government business. This more detailed classification is reflected in the second table.

Year	*Military movements*	*Civil movements*
1993	8,310	4,650
1994	7,319	5,425
1995	7,981	6,492

Year	*RAF*	*Other military*	*Civil aircraft on Government business*	*Civil*
1996	5,474	1,878	548	6,469
1997	5,129	1,623	498	6,976

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what projections his Department have made of the use by general aviation traffic of RAF Northolt airport in the next three years. [51202]

Dr. Reid: None. It is current Ministry of Defence policy to limit use at RAF Northolt to 7,000 civil movements per annum. In addition, the Ministry of Defence has limited opening hours to between 8am and 8pm on weekdays with weekend use permitted only when the station is open for operational reasons. Furthermore, only quieter aircraft which have a maximum capacity of 30 passengers are allowed to use Northolt.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects a decision to be made on the future of RAF Northolt. [51754]

Dr. Reid: Early proposals on the future of RAF Northolt are highly unlikely. There are several strands of work currently under way which must be taken into account. Firstly, the Ministry of Defence is drawing up a strategic development plan for the defence estate in the Greater London area, which will include RAF Northolt. In addition, there is work which has been set in hand by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on business aviation in the south-east. Finally, the Integrated Transport White Paper published on 20 July 1998 provides a framework for further work on airports policy.

War Graves

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what financial assistance is available from his Department to help in the cost of a person visiting a war grave in a European war grave cemetery. [51241]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1985, the Royal British Legion have operated the War Widows Pilgrimage Scheme on behalf of the Ministry of Defence to provide financial assistance to any Service widow, whose husband died and was buried overseas between 1914 and 1967, to visit the grave.

The Scheme, which entitles any Service widow to make one visit to the grave, is funded by a Grant-in-Aid from the Defence Budget which contributes $\frac{7}{8}$ of the cost of a pilgrimage; the remaining $\frac{1}{8}$ of the cost is borne by the widow. There are no plans to expand the Scheme to include other family members.

As I announced in the House of Commons on 5 May 1998, *Official Report*, column 282, following an approach by the Royal British Legion, I agreed to an extension of the War Widows Pilgrimage Scheme until 31 March 2001. I intend to conduct an automatic review every two years; as long as there are Service widows eligible to visit their husband's grave, this Government will continue to renew the Scheme.

Nuclear Accidents

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the nature of the contracts between the Nuclear Accident Response Organisation and the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency; how much each contract is worth; how long each contract lasts; and when each was signed. [46821]

Dr. Reid: The single contract between the HQ Nuclear Accident Response Organisation and the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency is for the provision of radiological protection services. The contract is renewed annually, runs between 1 April and 31 March and is worth around £75,000.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of currently available space for storage of radioactive waste is currently used; and what percentage he estimates will be used by *(a)* 1 April 2000, *(b)* 1 April 2005 and *(c)* 1 April 2010. [51154]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* I am satisfied that there is sufficient storage space to accommodate safely all my Department's radioactive wastes beyond 2010. Details of my Department's radioactive waste arisings at 1994 are publicly available in the most recent NIREX inventory.

Details about the anticipated percentage usage of the available storage capacity for the dates 1 April 2000, 1 April 2005 and 1 April 2010 are dependent on future decisions about the timing of decommissioning of facilities and the remediation of sites.

Sri Lankan Military Officers

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Sri Lankan military officers are currently being taught at United Kingdom educational establishments, including military colleges; which institutions they are attending; and how many are at each institution. [51798]

Dr. Reid: None.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance has been given to the Government of Sri Lanka to establish their Army Staff College; and if any British personnel are attached to the college. [51800]

Dr. Reid: A Short Term Training Team comprising 2 Lieutenant Colonels visited Sri Lanka between 8 September and 21 December 1997 to assist in the establishment of the country's Army Staff College. Since the beginning of this year, one Colonel has served as an instructor at the Sri Lankan Army Staff College.

Bilderberg Meeting, Turnberry

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *659*, on the Bilderberg meeting at Turnberry, if he will list the main topics discussed at the meeting and place copies of *(a)* the agenda and *(b)* the minutes of the meeting in the Library. [51550]

Mr. George Robertson: I have no Ministerial responsibility for the agenda or production of a record of the Bilderberg meeting which I attended in May this year.

Kneller Hall

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what are the Government's plans for the future of Kneller Hall; and what recent discussions have taken place on this subject; [51598]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Royal Military School of Music's future occupancy of Kneller Hall. [51600]

Mr. Spellar: There have been no recent discussions on the Royal Military School of Music's future occupancy of Kneller Hall. The Government currently have no plans to move the school from its present site. More widely, Kneller Hall is one of the sites to be considered by the Greater London Strategic Development Plan. This study flows from the Strategic Defence Review and has the objective of identifying opportunities to meet defence estate requirements in the most cost effective manner. A report will be produced at the end of the year and full consultation will take place before we reach any final decisions on those sites that may be affected.

Armistice Anniversary

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will announce to Parliament the results of his review of death sentences carried out in the Great War prior to the 80th anniversary of the Armistice on 11 November 1999. [51860]

Dr. Reid: I hope to make an announcement shortly.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 8 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *440*; what were the export control categories of the items which went with the Hawk aircraft; how many items of each equipment category went; and if the licences for any of those items were granted after May 1997. [49412]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence said on 8 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *440*, the timing of the delivery of any equipment is a matter for the exporter, subject to the conditions of any export licence. I understand that on 10 July British Aerospace informed officials at the Ministry of Defence that it had delivered no Hawk aircraft to Indonesia between 2 May 1997 and that date.

An applicant for an individual export licence must, of course, provide adequate information to enable the Government to decide whether or not to issue a licence, but there is no requirement that a trade name (such as 'Hawk') be specified on an application, or that the details be recorded on the Export Control Organisation's computer databases. Therefore, it is not possible to compile a list of all standard or open individual export licences granted since 2 May 1997 covering the export to Indonesia of goods intended for, or capable of, use with a particular type of aircraft, except by recourse to the paper records of all licences covering exports to Indonesia, which would entail disproportionate cost.

However, as I stated in an answer to my hon. Friend on 21 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *448–49*, licences covering the export to Indonesia of Hawk aircraft and equipment, including weapons systems and spares, had been issued on 2 January 1996 and 22 November 1996. The export of this ancillary equipment was controlled under entries ML4, ML5, ML10, ML15, ML16, ML18, ML22, and PL 5017 of Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Workers

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes he proposes to make to the arrangements for overseas domestic workers who accompany their employers to the United Kingdom. [52283]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have been concerned for some time at reports of abuse of domestic workers accompanying their employers to the United Kingdom. We have been working with Kalayaan, the organisation which represents overseas domestic workers, to see what changes we could make to the conditions under which they are admitted, with a view to improving them and preventing abuse.

With effect from today, only those domestic workers whose duties exceed those set down in the International Labour Organisation's International Standard Classification of Occupations will be allowed to accompany their employer to the United Kingdom. This means that those whose duties are only cleaning,

washing and cooking will not qualify. Once in the United Kingdom, they will be allowed to change domestic employment to another employer, provided the nature of their duties meets the above criteria.

These changes, which we shall include in the Immigration Rules at a suitable opportunity, will reduce the number of overseas domestic workers admitted to the United Kingdom. However, once here, they will be able to change to another employer if they suffer abuse from their original employer. We also propose to regularise the stay of those overseas domestic workers who, because of the shortcomings of the provisions in the past, find themselves in an irregular position through no fault of their own.

Firearms Consultative Committee

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will lay before Parliament the ninth Annual report of the Firearms Consultative Committee. [52417]

Mr. Straw: I have placed in the Library today a copy of the annual report of the Firearms Consultative Committee.

Forensic Science Service

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will lay before Parliament the Annual Report for the Forensic Science Service. [52418]

Mr. Straw: I have today laid before Parliament copies of the Forensic Science Service (FSS) Annual Report and Accounts for 1997–98.

The Report and Accounts details the Agency's performance against its targets. The FSS continues to grow at a significant pace, and efficiency savings are at the highest level since it became an agency in 1991. The FSS passes on these improvements to customers through real price reductions and higher investment in both research and development and infrastructure to improve the quality of products and services.

The achievement on four main indications was as follows:

Full cost recovery

The target was exceeded. The Operating surplus before exceptional items after interest was £3 million, representing a recovery of costs of 105.3 per cent. This is sufficient to recover brought forward accumulated deficit of £2 million;

Unit cost £80.91

The target was exceeded. The unit cost achieved was £79.88, representing an underlying efficiency improvement of 5.8 per cent. (against a target of 3.9 per cent.);

Achieve 90 per cent. of agreed delivery dates;

72 per cent. of agreed delivery dates was achieved. The increased volume of business made it impossible to achieve this target. The number of delivered jobs was well ahead of expectations, but increase in capacity is in hand to meet future customer demands within the target times; and

Maintain quality accreditation (NAMAS M10 and BS EN ISO 9001)

Accreditation was maintained and extended to other scientific areas.

The total number of delivered jobs—which represent individual parts of a case—showed a greater than predicted increase of 28 per cent. Measures were put in place to minimise the impact on turnaround times.

The speed of delivery of DNA jobs will be further improved by the recruitment of more scientific staff and the new DNA unit at Huntingdon.

Prison Accommodation

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the certified normal accommodation for each prison in England and Wales *(a)* in 1998 and *(b)* for each of the next seven years. [51404]

Ms Quin: The table lists the 1997–98 actual financial year averages and the 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01 forecast averages of certified normal accommodation (CNA) for each prison in England and Wales. There are no changes forecast to CNA beyond March 2002, although plans are currently under review.

Certified normal accommodation by prison

Prison	*Actual 1997–98*	*Forecast 1998–99*	*Forecast 1999–00*	*Forecast 2000–01*	*Forecast 2001–02*
Acklington	662	682	782	782	782
Agecroft	—	—	233	800	800
Albany	436	436	436	436	436
Aldington	145	145	145	145	145
Altcourse	150	600	600	600	600
Ashwell	444	484	484	484	484
Askham Grange	130	132	133	133	133
Aylesbury	318	398	438	438	438
Bedford	343	352	352	352	352
Belmarsh	840	840	840	840	840
Birmingham	719	734	737	737	737
Blakenhurst	647	647	647	647	647
Blantyre House	120	120	120	120	120
Blundeston	416	424	424	424	424
Brinsford	477	477	477	477	477
Bristol	489	489	489	489	489
Brixton	720	720	720	720	720
Brockhill	159	159	159	159	159
Buckley Hall	350	350	350	350	350
Bullingdon	718	773	773	773	773
Bullwood Hall	131	140	140	140	140
Camphill	468	463	470	470	470

Certified normal accommodation by prison

Prison	*Actual 1997–98*	*Forecast 1998–99*	*Forecast 1999–00*	*Forecast 2000–01*	*Forecast 2001–02*
Canterbury	186	198	198	198	198
Cardiff	530	518	518	518	518
Castington	320	350	450	450	450
Channings Wood	594	594	594	594	594
Chelmsford	448	449	449	449	449
Colchester	32	—	—	—	—
Coldingley	298	301	334	334	334
Cookham Wood	120	120	120	120	120
Dartmoor	620	694	701	701	701
Deerbolt	450	471	486	486	486
Doncaster	771	771	771	771	771
Dorchester	147	166	170	170	170
Dover	316	316	316	316	316
Downview	327	327	327	327	327
Drake Hall	281	281	281	281	281
Durham	663	674	674	674	674
East Sutton Park	94	94	94	94	94
Eastwood Park	175	255	255	255	255
Elmley	740	760	760	760	760
Erlestoke	310	310	310	310	310
Everthorpe	438	438	438	438	438
Exeter	266	317	321	321	321
Featherstone	599	599	599	599	599
Feltham	886	886	886	886	886
Ford	529	526	526	526	526
Foston	126	134	134	134	134
Frankland	447	590	637	637	637
Full Sutton	602	602	602	602	602
Garth	603	633	633	633	633
Gartree	364	365	366	366	366
Glen Parva	852	852	852	852	852
Gloucester	220	235	235	235	235
Grendon	245	250	254	254	254
Guys Marsh	360	474	487	487	487
Haslar	158	158	158	158	158
Hatfield	180	180	180	180	180
Haverigg	530	530	530	530	530
Hewell Grange	203	203	203	203	203
Highdown	649	649	649	649	649
Highpoint	679	770	800	800	800
Hindley	531	531	531	531	531
Hollesley Bay	458	458	458	458	458
Holloway	517	517	517	517	517
Holme House	933	971	971	971	971
Hull	536	572	616	620	620
Huntercombe	256	366	376	376	376
Kingston	185	192	193	193	193
Kirkham	702	702	702	702	702
Kirklevington	177	183	184	184	184
Lancaster	218	218	218	218	218
Lancaster Farms	496	496	496	496	496
Latchmere House	192	193	193	193	193
Leeds	1,049	1,056	1,056	1,056	1,056
Leicester	215	219	219	219	219
Lewes	485	485	485	485	485
Leyhill	410	410	410	410	410
Lincoln	434	442	454	454	454
Lindholme	682	686	686	686	686
Littlehey	624	624	624	624	624
Liverpool	1,216	1,216	1,216	1,216	1,216
Long Lartin	456	480	602	602	602
Low Newton	203	211	211	211	211
Lowdham Grange	504	504	504	504	504
Maidstone	542	551	551	551	551
Manchester	964	948	953	953	953
Marchington	—	—	—	275	800
Moorland	650	740	740	740	740
Morton Hall	203	208	208	208	208
Mount	588	588	708	708	708
New Hall	313	327	327	327	327
North Sea Camp	213	213	213	213	213
Northallerton	152	152	152	152	152
Norwich	570	572	572	572	572
Norwich	570	572	572	572	572
Nottingham	391	421	425	425	425
Onley	583	640	640	640	640

Certified normal accommodation by prison

Prison	*Actual 1997–98*	*Forecast 1998–99*	*Forecast 1999–00*	*Forecast 2000–01*	*Forecast 2001–02*
Onley[2]	—	—	—	250	600
Parc	227	800	800	800	800
Parkhurst	476	482	482	482	482
Pentonville	891	897	897	897	897
Portland	526	526	526	526	526
Prescoed	120	120	120	120	120
Preston	440	445	445	445	445
Pucklechurch	—	—	217	400	400
Ranby	519	662	710	710	710
Reading	203	203	203	203	203
Risley	851	851	851	851	851
Rochester	432	433	433	433	433
Send	224	231	231	231	231
Shepton Mallet	159	171	174	174	174
Shrewsbury	180	182	182	182	182
Spring Hill	214	256	256	256	256
Stafford	568	568	568	568	568
Standford Hill	384	384	384	384	384
Stocken	436	536	556	556	556
Stoke Heath	516	646	646	646	646
Styal	282	374	404	404	404
Sudbury	511	512	517	517	517
Swaleside	572	632	742	752	752
Swansea	260	251	251	251	251
Swinfen Hall	203	309	319	319	319
Thorn Cross	316	316	316	316	316
Usk	126	128	131	131	131
Verne	552	552	552	552	552
Wakefield	724	742	744	744	744
Wandsworth	1,224	1,201	1,187	1,187	1,187
Wayland	620	620	620	620	620
Wealstun	599	631	632	632	632
Weare	304	400	400	400	400
Wellingborough	354	374	524	554	5542
Werrington	153	140	140	140	140
Wetherby	320	360	360	360	360
Whatton	231	269	275	275	275
Whitemoor	521	522	522	522	522
Winchester	463	463	463	463	463
Wolds	360	360	360	360	360
Woodhill	669	721	725	725	725
Wormwood Scrubs	1,189	1,189	1,189	1,189	1,189
Wymott	809	809	809	809	809

Grants and Awards (Wakefield)

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the grants and awards that require bids from applicants which his Department is responsible for administering and awarding *(a)* nationally and *(b)* that people and groups within Wakefield Metropolitan District are eligible to bid for; if he will publish the deadlines for these applications; and if he will produce this list on a regular basis. [51273]

Mr. Straw: The information requested in respect of grants and awards directly administered by the Home Office is given in the table.

The Home Office wants its grant and awards programmes to reach as many potential applicants as possible and uses a variety of national and local media outlets, plus its network of contacts, to ensure that this is achieved. I have no plans to produce an aggregated list of these programmes regularly.

Title of grants and awards programmes that require bids	*Geographical eligibility*	*Deadline for applications*
Safer Cities (Wales only)	Wales only	Programme is due to end March 1999
Programme Development	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	3 year grant cycle—next programme for bids expected sometime 1999
Drugs Prevention Initiative	12 regional teams invite bids one of which includes Wakefield	No formal deadline
Probation Supervision and Accommodation	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	No formal deadline
Voluntary Services	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	30 September each year
Reduction of Racial Disadvantage/Ethnic Minorities	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	No formal deadline

Title of grants and awards programmes that require bids	*Geographical eligibility*	*Deadline for applications*
Reception and Resettlement of Refugees	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	End of December
Compensation for Miscarriages of Justice	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	No formal deadline
Mental Health Assessment Schemes	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Last bids exercise 1995. No plans to invite new bids
Drugs Prevention Measures in Great Britain	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Rolling programme
Crime Prevention Partnerships (CCTV)	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Programme completed
Section 11 Grants/Ethnic Minorities	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Following a review, new arrangements will apply after 31 March 1999. Further announcements are to be made
Philip Lawrence awards	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Mid September each year
Small grants scheme for local cadets forces	National eligibility irrespective of geographical area	Scheme is due to end October 1998

CS Spray

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of recorded incidents involving the use of CS gas as a criminal weapon for the most recent five years for which records are available. [51392]

Mr. Michael: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Statistics of the use of firearms in crime are reported by police forces to the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate broken down into five categories: air weapons; handguns; rifles; shotguns; and other weapons. The 'others' category usually involves the use of some form of prohibited weapons. To provide the detailed information requested would require a manual search of all the returns provided by forces for each of the last five years.

Party Conferences

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what level of special grant to Lancashire Constabulary has been authorised to assist with the cost of policing at the Labour Party Conference in 1998; and how the level was calculated; [51396]

(2) what representations he has received from Lancashire Constabulary on the cost of policing the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool in 1998; [51395]

(3) what charges have been levied by Lancashire Constabulary on political parties to meet the costs of policing party conferences in each year since 1995. [51403]

Mr. Michael: There is no question of any police force levying a charge on political parties to meet the costs of policing a national conference. The power to assist with these costs is quite recent, having been provided for in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

The power to pay special grant to police authorities for the policing of party conferences was set out in the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. No clear criteria for payment was set down, but we are now trying to develop an appropriate and coherent approach.

The costs of policing party conferences at Blackpool since 1995, as estimated by Lancashire Constabulary, are set out in the table.

£

Year	*Labour Party*	*Conservative Party*
1995	—	[1]662,000
1996	2,620,000	—
1997	—	2,245,000

[1] Lancashire were only able to provide information on additional costs for 1995

The Lancashire Police Authority was given a special grant of £750,000 towards the additional costs of policing the Conservative Party Conference in 1997. For 1998–99, we have authorised a payment of grant of up to £750,000 as a contribution to the costs of safeguarding national security at this year's Labour Party Conference in Blackpool. A similar sum is being made available to Dorset Police Authority in respect of this year's Conservative Party Conference. Only £1.5 million was available for allocation between Dorset and Lancashire forces this year. As both forces were expecting to incur similar additional costs, we decided that the grant should be divided equally between them.

I met members of the Lancashire Police Authority in January about the funding settlement for 1998–99 when they expressed concern at the level of the special grant available for policing party conferences and I have recently met representatives of the Dorset Police Authority to discuss similar issues. I have asked for the views of the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities about the future allocation of this grant, with a view to determining a fair way of assisting police with the activities which are related to the main party conferences. The views of Lancashire and Dorset will be borne in mind at that stage.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what public funds have been made available to political parties to assist with the cost

of *(a)* the policing and *(b)* other security measures at party conferences in Blackpool in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 1998. [51402]

Mr. Straw: *(a)* No public funds have been paid to political parties in respect of policing costs at party conferences.

(b)

1996: £529,000.00

1997: £575,268.92

1998: None as yet.

Citizenship Applications

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for British nationality are currently outstanding. [51538]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As at 30 June 1998, there were approximately 95,500 applications awaiting determination.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents have involved armed officers of the Metropolitan Police in the Greater London area in each of the last three years. [51540]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner tells me that the number of incidents involving armed officers in the Metropolitan Police District is as follows:

Year	*Number of incidents*
1995	1,438
1996	1,637
1997	1,660
1998	[1]923

[1] 1 January to 24 June

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the number of drug related deaths in prisons in England and Wales in each of the last five years. [51541]

Ms Quin: The information requested is given in the table.

Drug related deaths in prisons in England and Wales

Year	*Number of drug related deaths*
1993	7
1994	9
1995	5
1996	1
1997	2
Total	24

Shootings

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of shootings with handguns have been reported since their possession was made illegal; and how many were reported over the last similar period before the ban was introduced. [51654]

Mr. Michael: The Criminal Statistics are collected and published on a yearly basis to 31 December. The figures for the year ending 31 December 1997 are not yet available. Because of this, it is not yet possible to provide the information requested. In the year ending 31 December 1996, there were 2,956 notifiable offences recorded by the police in which handguns were reported to have been used.

The Firearms (Amendment) Acts 1997 were passed in order to ensure as far as possible that the terrible events which took place at Dunblane Primary School on 13 March 1996 would never be repeated.

The legislation was not intended specifically to reduce the use of handguns in crime. Nevertheless, the legislation will mean that the several hundred handguns misappropriated from private homes and cars each year will no longer be available to swell the number of illegally held weapons.

Immigration and Nationality Department

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the planned date for the introduction of the integrated caseworking system in the Immigration and Nationality Department; what problems have been encountered in relation to the supporting technology and software for the system; what was the original estimated cost of introducing the system; what is the revised estimated cost of introduction; and if he will make a statement. [51601]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 22 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *633*, and to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *436*. I have undertaken to write to both hon. Members when the timetable for the introduction of the system is known. The resolution of the technical difficulties which have caused the delay is a matter for the service provider, Siemens Business Services (SBS). Under the Private Finance Initiative contract, the costs of introducing the system fall to SBS. After the system is introduced, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate will pay a scale of service charges calculated in relation to the level of improvement in efficiency actually achieved.

Criminal Attempts and Forgery and Counterfeiting Acts

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons are currently held at HMP Wormwood Scrubs following their conviction for offences contrary to *(a)* Section 1 of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 and *(b)* Section 3 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981. [51604]

Ms Quin: The information requested could be obtained only by examining individual prisoners records at the prison, which would involve disproportionate cost.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons were arrested at *(a)* Heathrow airport and *(b)* other United Kingdom airports for offences contrary to (i) Section 1 of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 or (ii) Section 3 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981, in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98. [51603]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not normally collected centrally. However the Metropolitan police have been able to provide information on persons accused—that is, a count of persons arrested and subsequently proceeded against. The information relates to persons accused in the Heathrow division of attempting to commit a notifiable offence and those accused under sections 3 and 4 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981. The information is given in the table.

To obtain similar information from all police forces which have an airport located in their area would incur disproportionate cost, since manual searches through individual records would be required.

Persons accused at Heathrow airport	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Accused of attempting to commit a notifiable offence	201	232	206
Accused of offences under sections 3 and 4 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981	50	43	66

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what projections have been made of the number of asylum applications to be *(a)* determined and *(b)* refused by his Department in (i) 1998, (ii) 1999, (iii) 2000, (iv) the financial year 1998–99 and (v) the financial year 1999–2000. [51606]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I would ask the hon. Member to await the major announcement my right hon. Friend shall be making on immigration and asylum next week.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the immigration-related applications for leave to move for judicial review in 1996–97 were *(a)* asylum-related and *(b)* non-asylum related. [51611]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Of the 1,830 immigration related applications for leave to move for judicial review lodged in the financial year 1996–97, it is estimated that 70 per cent. related to applications for asylum and the remaining 30 per cent. to other non-asylum cases.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many non-asylum immigration appeals have been *(a)* received by his Department, *(b)* sent to the Immigration Appeals Authority and *(c)* determined by the Immigration Appeals Authority in each month of 1998; and how many such appeals are currently awaiting hearing by adjudicators of the Immigration Appeals Authority; [51613]

(2) how many appeals against a refusal of asylum have been *(a)* received by his Department, *(b)* sent to the Immigration Appeals Authority and *(c)* determined by the Immigration Appeals Authority in each month of 1998; and how many such appeals are currently awaiting hearing by special adjudicators of the Immigration Appeals Authority. [51612]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested in points *(a)*, *(b)* and *(c)*, relating to asylum and non-asylum appeals is given in the table.

As regards appeals awaiting hearing, the Immigration Appellate Authority reports that, at the end of June 1998, there was a total of 26,670 adjudicator cases outstanding. Of these, 20,870 related to applications for asylum and 5,800 to other immigration matters.

Appeals to the adjudicators of the Immigration Appellate Authority, January to June 1998 [1]

Number of principal appellants

	January	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*	*Total*
Appeals received by the Home Office	2,325	2,410	2,930	2,400	1,985	2,400	14,455
of which:							
Asylum[2]	1,425	1,325	1,645	1,635	1,255	1,490	8,770
Non-asylum[3,4]	905	1,085	1,285	765	730	910	5,680
Appeals sent to the Immigration Appellate Authority	2,425	2,215	2,680	2,410	1,765	2,650	14,145
of which:							
Asylum[2]	1,565	1,485	1,530	1,390	1,190	1,655	8,815
Non-asylum[3,4]	865	730	1,150	1,020	575	995	5,335
Appeals determined by the Immigration Appellate Authority[5]	2,700	2,795	2,745	2,880	2,800	3,165	17,080
of which:							
Asylum[2]	1,745	1,615	1,995	1,605	1,600	2,075	10,640
Non-asylum[3,4]	955	1,180	750	1,275	1,200	1,090	6,440

[1] All figures have been rounded to the nearest 5
[2] Information supplied by the Asylum Directorate (casework), IND
[3] Information supplied by the After Entry and Appeals Directorate and the Financial Services Directorate, IND
[4] These figures will include a small number of statements prepared for appeals to the Tribunal
[5] Information supplied by the Immigration Appellate Authority

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum were determined by his Department in each month of 1998; and with what result. [51605]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Initial decisions [1,2] on asylum applications, excluding dependants, January to June 1998

Month	Total decisions	Grants of asylum	Grants of exceptional leave	Refused asylum and exceptional leave
January	3,065	705	230	2,130
February	3,035	405	390	2,240
March	3,070	375	425	2,270
April	2,520	350	320	1,850
May	2,360	420	250	1,690
June	2,675	580	305	1,790

[1] Figures rounded to nearest 5

[2] Decision figures do not necessarily relate to applications made in 1998

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of the reasons for the adjournment of asylum and immigration appeals. [51609]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None. It is a matter for the Immigration Appellate Authority to decide whether an appeal should be adjourned. Adjournments may be requested by the appellant or the respondent, or initiated by the Authority itself.

Bargoed Fire Station

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what access the South Wales fire authority has had to the reports and assessments made available to his Department by Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire Services on the proposed closures of the Bargoed Fire Station; [52017]

(2) if he will list those to whom his Department has sent Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire Services' report on the proposed closure of the Bargoed Fire Station. [52016]

Mr. George Howarth: Such reports have not been made available outside the Home Office.

PRIME MINISTER

Libya

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 23 June, if he will list the long-standing differences to which he refers between the European Union and the United States over US sanctions under the Iran Libya Sanctions Act; and what is his estimate of the time scale for Libya complying with UN resolutions. [51525]

The Prime Minister: The long-standing differences between the European Union and the United States to which I referred related to secondary boycotts and legislation with extraterritorial or retroactive effect. The agreement at the EU/US Summit of 18 May has laid the basis for resolving these differences, specifically those over the Iran Libya Sanctions Act and the Helms Burton legislation on Cuba.

The time scale for Libyan compliance with UN Security Council resolutions is in Libya's hands. We continue to press them to fulfil their obligations. UN sanctions will remain until they do.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*, if he will list the dates of appointment of the 10 longest serving Lord-Lieutenants. [52010]

The Prime Minister: The answer is as follows:

Sir Thomas Dunne KCVO—appointed 14 June 1977 as Lord-Lieutenant of Hereford and Worcester, and as Lord-Lieutenant for the separate counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire on the formation of those counties on 1 April 1998.

His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury KT VRD—appointed 18 June 1974.

The Earl of Leven and Melville—appointed 21 July 1969.

The Viscount of Arbuthnott KT CBE DSC FRSE—appointed 31 January 1977.

Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison KCVO—appointed 9 June 1979.

Colonel Sir Michael McCorkell KCVO OBE TD—appointed 15 May 1975.

The Right Honourable Lord Kingdown KG—appointed 31 July 1982.

Sir David Mansel Lewis KCVO JP BA—appointed 14 February 1979.

Sir Timothy Colman KG—appointed 19 March 1978.

Lieutenant Colonel James Stirling of Garden CBE TD—appointed 14 December 1983.

Lord-Lieutenants may serve until their 75th birthday.

Policy Unit

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *389*, (1) how many telephone calls were made by Roger Liddle from No. 10 Downing Street to *(a)* Derek Draper and *(b)* GPC Market Access in the four weeks prior to 24 June; [51908]

(2) if he will list the telephone calls made by Roger Liddle to newspaper reporters on 25 June. [51909]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to him on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *94*.

In this context, outside organisations obviously includes newspaper reporters.

Security Services

Mr. Radice: To ask the Prime Minister when the annual report of the Commissioner appointed under the Intelligence Services Act 1994 will be laid before the House; and if he will make a statement. [52369]

The Prime Minister: A copy of Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's annual report, for 1997, has been laid before the House today in accordance with section 8(6) of the Intelligence Services Act 1994. The confidential annexe to the report has been excluded from that copy in accordance with section of 8(7) of the 1994 Act. I am grateful to the Commissioner for his work in reviewing the issue of warrants and authorisations, and in providing assistance to the Tribunal as provided for in the Act.

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Prime Minister when the annual report of the Commissioner appointed under the Security Service Act 1989 will be laid before the House; and if he will make a statement. [52370]

The Prime Minister: A copy of Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's eighth annual report, for 1997, has been laid before the House today in accordance with section 4(6) of the Security Service Act 1989. The confidential annexe to the report has been excluded from that copy in accordance with section 4(7) of the 1989 Act and in line with the Commissioner's recommendation. I am grateful to the Commissioner for his work in providing assistance to the Tribunal which operates under the Act and for reviewing the issue of warrants under the Intelligence Services Act 1994.

Interception of Communications

Mr. Derek Foster: To ask the Prime Minister when the annual report of the Commissioner appointed under section 8(1) of the Interception of Communications Act 1985 will be laid before the House; and if he will make a statement. [52371]

The Prime Minister: A copy of Lord Nolan's annual report for 1997 has been laid before the House today in accordance with section 8(7) of the Interception of Communications Act 1985. The confidential annexe to the report has been excluded from that copy in accordance with section 8(8) of the 1985 Act in accordance with the Commissioner's recommendations. I am grateful to the Commissioner for his work in reviewing the issue of warrants during the year. I note in particular the Commissioner's view that interception of both postal communications and telecommunications remains an effective and an essential operation in the interests of national security and the economic well-being of the United Kingdom, and the prevention and detection of serious crime.

Council of Europe and WEU

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the latest information bulletin on the activities of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union covering the period October 1997 to April 1998. [52037]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

Life Peers

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister who by convention, in addition to the Leader of the Opposition, makes regular nominations to the Prime Minister of candidates for possible ennoblement as life peers. [51951]

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Liberal Democrats makes regular nominations for life peers. In addition, I receive nominations from a wide range of people including leaders of other political parties.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many acts of paramilitary violence took place in (i) April, (ii) May and (iii) June; to which paramilitary organisation the RUC has attributed responsibility; and what were the equivalent figures for the same period in 1997. [48299]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The table indicates the number of acts of paramilitary violence which took place during April, May and June of this year and the equivalent figures for the same period last year.

	Loyalist		*Republican*		*Unknown*		*Security Forces*		*Total*	
	1997	*1998*	*1997*	*1998*	*1997*	*1998*	*1997*	*1998*	*1997*	*1998*
April										
Deaths	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	4
Shooting Incidents	7	9	5	8	5	1	2	1	19	19
Bombing Incidents	3	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	3	5
Casualties as a result of paramilitary attacks										
Shootings	4	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	5	7
Assaults	5	6	6	1	0	0	0	0	11	7
May										
Deaths	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	1
Shooting Incidents	6	5	2	2	3	5	0	0	11	12
Bombing Incidents	2	2	1	7	0	0	0	0	3	9
Casualties as a result of paramilitary attacks										
Shootings	2	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	5
Assaults	7	8	4	3	0	0	0	0	11	11
June										
Deaths	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	4	2
Shooting Incidents	8	4	5	10	4	3	2	2	19	19
Bombing Incidents	3	0	2	5	0	0	0	0	5	5

	Loyalist		Republican		Unknown		Security Forces		Total	
	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998
Casualties as a result of paramilitary attacks										
Shootings	6	4	2	9	0	0	0	0	8	13
Assaults	2	8	1	11	0	0	0	0	3	19

Notes:
1. It is not possible to be more specific on attribution which is based on information available and may be subject to change or adjustment
2. Care should be taken not to add all the incidents together as some are included in more than one heading e.g. deaths in April 1998 were as a result of shooting incidents
3. These figures are based on verified statistics and in a previously published form

Disappearances

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what records her Department maintains on those people who disappeared during the Troubles; and if she will urge paramilitary groups to release any information which they have on their whereabouts. [48296]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Northern Ireland Office does not maintain records on people who disappeared during the Troubles. The RUC, however, hold open files on those known as "The Disappeared". The Government have urged paramilitary groups and representatives of such groups to convey information about this matter to the RUC, and will continue to do so in the future. It is vital that the issue is resolved within the context of the Agreement.

Parades Commission

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much has been spent on setting up the Parades Commission; and if she will estimate its annual running costs for a full year broken down into *(a)* payments to the members of the Commission and *(b)* administrative expenditure. [50147]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Parades Commission has, since its creation, occupied the rented premises previously used by the Parades Review Team and inherited most of its office equipment and material from that team. Staff were deployed from duties elsewhere in the Northern Ireland Office. Actual start-up costs were therefore minimal,.

The estimated outturn figure for 1998–99 is £1 million, made up of £260,000 Departmental Running Costs, comprising staff pay and general administrative expenditure such as travel and stationery and £740,000 Non-Departmental running costs, including payments to members, accommodation costs for rental, rates and electricity, grants to the Mediation Network, including the salary and support costs of the Authorised Officers and research and consultancy costs.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration and Asylum Appeals

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many asylum and immigration appeals were adjourned in (i) 1996 and (ii) 1997; and what proportion of these adjournments were a consequence of *(a)* an application by the appellant, *(b)* an application by his Department and *(c)* other reasons. [51608]

Mr. Hoon: The Immigration Appellate Authority does not retain accurate historical information on the volume, proportion or breakdown of asylum and immigration appeals that are adjourned.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what international comparisons his Department has made of the availability of legal aid for representation at *(a)* asylum appeal hearings and *(b)* non-asylum immigration appeal hearings; [51614]

(2) what international comparisons he has made on the availability of legal aid for representation at asylum appeal hearings. [51610]

Mr. Hoon: My Department has not undertaken any research on this subject.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many further appeals to the Immigration Appeal Tribunal against a refusal of asylum were awaiting a hearing on *(a)* 31 December 1996, *(b)* 31 December 1997 and *(c)* 30 June 1998. [51602]

Mr. Hoon: The number of outstanding applications/ appeals before the Immigration Appeal Tribunal were:

	Applications	Appeals
(a) 31 December 1996	'350	'250
(b) 31 December 1997	1,125	1,018
(c) 30 June 1998	1,576	1,316

' Estimated figures as historical data for this period are not accurate

The number of outstanding appeals before the Immigration Appeal Adjudicators were:

(a) 31 December 1996: 20,104

(b) 31 December 1997: 22,484

(c) 30 June 1998: 20,869.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proportion of *(a)* asylum and *(b)* immigration appeals were determined on the basis of the papers only in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998 to date. [51607]

Mr. Hoon: The Immigration Appellate Authority does not differentiate between, or keep accurate records of, appeals that are dealt with and disposed of in court, against those that are dealt with on the basis of the papers.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to increase the number of *(a)* adjudicators and *(b)* special adjudicators employed by the Immigration Appeals Authority during the financial year (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000. [51615]

Mr. Hoon: There is a rolling programme of recruitment to increase the number of adjudicators and special adjudicators. This will continue at least into the year 2000.

Mr. Allan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what projections have been made of the number of *(a)* asylum and *(b)* immigration appeals to be heard and determined by the Immigration Appeals Authority in (i) 1998, (ii) 1999, (iii) 2000, (iv) the financial year 1998–99 and (v) the financial year 1999–2000. [51616]

Mr. Hoon: It is projected that there will be 38,455 cases disposed of by the Immigration Adjudicators in 1998 of which 25,865 will relate to asylum. During the same year a further 16,628 cases will be disposed of by the Immigration Appeal Tribunal of which 12,191 will relate to asylum. The comparable figures for 1998–99 are 38,910 Adjudicator disposals of which 27,142 will be asylum and 17,357 Tribunal disposals of which 13,084 will be asylum.

There are no reliable projection figures of the number of appeals which will be dealt with after April 1999, but as a result of the comprehensive spending review significant extra resources will be made available to the Immigration Appellate Authority (IAA) over the period 1999–2003, enabling it to increase the number of appeals disposed of substantially.

Legal Aid

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the block contracts for immigration/asylum legal aid to cover England and Wales will be awarded by the Legal Aid Board. [50906]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has asked the Legal Aid Board to complete the provision of civil advice and assistance, including immigration and asylum cases, exclusively through contracts by the end of 1999.

WALES

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50692]

Mr. Ron Davies: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*, by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service.

North Wales Coast

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if the Environment Agency has an independent working computer model of the hydrographic regime of the inshore waters of the North Wales coastal region for planning and management purposes. [51381]

Mr. Win Griffiths: This is a matter for the Environment Agency. I understand the Agency has identified no need for such a model to discharge its planning and management responsibilities. If it required one, it would commission other organisations to produce it.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will establish the factors underlying the recent high turbidity in the inshore waters along the North Wales coast. [51386]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The June rainfall for 1998 has been one of the highest for any June on record. High river flows as a result of the rain will have generated a larger than normal sediment load into inshore waters at this time of the year. In co-operation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which has responsibility for the regulation of dredging, the Environment Agency is also investigating whether possible illegal dumping of dredged material in the area has been a contributory factor.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if his Department will take steps to treat non-toxic algal blooms accumulated on the North Wales coast. [51388]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The dispersion of accumulated non-toxic algal blooms by natural forces usually occurs as quickly as the accumulations themselves. Non-toxic algal blooms are a naturally occurring phenomenon and do not pose a threat to public health; consequently, there are no plans to treat them.

Agri-environmental Programmes

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish his budget allocation for agri-environmental programmes for 1998–99. [51531]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I refer my hon. Friend to the Government's Expenditure Plans 1998–1999 as published in the Departmental Report by the Welsh Office (Cm 3915) and placed in the Library of the House.

Higher Education

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of applicants to each higher education institution in Wales in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [51749]

Mr. Hain: The information for 1997 is in the table. Data for 1998 are not available until the conclusion of the application cycle.

Applicants accepted to Welsh higher education institutions—1997 entry

University or college	*Applicants*
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	2,185
University of Wales, Bangor	1,762
University of Wales, Cardiff	3,946
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	1,785
Carmarthenshire College of Technology and Art	135
University of Glamorgan	2,200
University of Wales, Lampeter	540
The Mid Glamorgan Centre for Art and Design Technology	31
University of Wales College, Newport	866
The North East Wales Institute of Higher Education	525
University of Wales, Swansea	2,337
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	996
Trinity College Carmarthen	453
University of Wales College of Medicine	400
Welsh College of Music and Drama	141
Total	18,302

Source:
UCAS Annual Report 1997 Entry

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *333*, if he will list the names of all Lord-Lieutenants in Wales and the dates each was appointed. [52009]

Mr. Ron Davies: The names of the Lord-Lieutenants in Wales are:

Clwyd: Sir William Gladstone Bt., appointed on 6 August 1985.

Dyfed: Sir David Mansel Lewis KCVO, appointed on 14 February 1979.

Mid Glamorgan: Murray McLaggan, appointed on 1 December 1989.

South Glamorgan: Captain Norman Lloyd-Edwards, appointed on 17 August 1990.

West Glamorgan: Commodore Robert Hastie CBE RD* RNR, appointed on 10 April 1995.

Gwynedd: Meuric Rees CBE, appointed on 31 December 1989.

Gwent: Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison KCVO, appointed on 9 June 1979.

Powys: Mervyn Bourdillon, appointed on 15 July 1986 (retires August 1998).

Lord-Lieutenants may serve until their 75th birthday.

HEALTH

North Essex Health Authority

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what factors underlie the provision of NHS resources to the North Essex Health Authority at a rate per head of population of 10 per cent. below the English average; [43313]

(2) if he will increase the level of NHS funding per head of population in the North Essex Health Authority to the average for all English health authorities. [43310]

Mr. Milburn: In 1998–99, the allocation per weighted head of population for North Essex Health Authority is 2.3 per cent. below the England average.

The underlying principle of resource allocation in the National Health Service is equity.

A capitation formula is used to inform the distribution of hospital and community health services funding between health authorities which weights their populations for relative need.

The speed at which health authorities are moved closer to their weighted capitation targets is decided annually. For 1998–99, North Essex Health Authority received a real terms increase of £7.8 million or 2.2 per cent. compared to the England real terms average increase of 1.9 per cent.

In addition, North Essex Health Authority has received £4.7 million to target waiting lists in 1998–99.

Civil Servants

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many civil servants in his Department *(a)* have a degree in science and *(b)* have held a position using that expertise. [50894]

Mr. Milburn: At the present time, there are 61 civil servants within the Department who form the Scientific Group and fall within the responsibility of the Head of Profession for scientists. Of these, 60 have held positions using their scientific expertise. Other civil servants within the Department and its agencies will also have science degrees and will have held positions using that expertise, but information on educational qualifications for those staff is not held centrally.

Hospital Discharge Procedures

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *611*, concerning hospital discharge procedures, what timetable departmental officials are working to; and when he expects to publish his decision. [50939]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* We expect the conclusions of the review of guidance on hospital discharge to be available towards the end of the year.

Continence Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *451*, concerning continence supplies, what monitoring his Department will conduct on how the extra resources are deployed by the health service. [50938]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* Deployment of these resources will be monitored by regional offices of the National Health Service Executive as part of their performance management role.

Grants and Awards (Wakefield)

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the grants and awards that require bids from applicants which his Department is responsible for administering and awarding *(a)* nationally and *(b)* that people and groups within Wakefield Metropolitan District are eligible to bid for; if he will publish the deadlines for these applications; and if he will produce this list on a regular basis. [51271]

Mr. Boateng: The Department funds a number of nationwide schemes through which voluntary organisations can bid for grants. None prohibits applications from Wakefield.

Scheme	*Deadline for applications*
Section 64	18 September 1998
Opportunities for Volunteering	Varies according to the 17 agents administering the scheme
Ethnic Minority Health	Yet to be finalised, but likely to be around December 1998/January 1999
Shared Training grants—learning disabilities	Yet to be finalised

The Department will consider the most effective way of producing this list on a regular basis in the light of the Better Regulation Task Force's report on Access to Government Funding for the Voluntary Sector.

Hearing Aid Services

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the data collated centrally by his Department concerning adult audiology and hearing aid services; [51420]

(2) what performance indicators his Department *(a)* has used and *(b)* proposes to use for the providers of adult hearing aid services. [51408]

Mr. Milburn: The Department does not collect specific information about adult audiology and hearing aid services, although some data are available about Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) services which will include adult and paediatric audiology data.

Information on the number of ENT outpatient attendances, broken down by clinical speciality, is contained in "Outpatients and Ward Attenders, England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Information on the number of ENT day case and ordinary admissions by clinical specialty is contained in "Ordinary and Day Case Admissions for England", copies of which are also available in the Library.

There are no national performance indicators for adult hearing aid services.

Dentists

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health authorities have advertised *(a)* in Scandinavia and *(b)* elsewhere in the European Union for dentists since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [51456]

Mr. Milburn: Information about which health authorities have advertised to recruit dentists from Scandinavia or elsewhere in the European Union is not available centrally. The General Dental Council keeps a record of dentists coming from elsewhere in the EU, whom it registers to practise in this country.

NHS Medicines

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to reduce the costs of procuring medicines for the NHS. [51052]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* We intend to approach the procurement of medicines with a view to obtaining effective health care for patients at a cost which is fair.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last reviewed the pharmaceutical pricing scheme for the NHS. [51046]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The prices of branded medicines sold to the National Health Service are governed by the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme, a voluntary agreement between the health departments and the pharmaceutical industry, represented by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. The last full review of the scheme was at the negotiation of the current agreement, which runs from 1 October 1993.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current rate of return used in calculating drug prices for the NHS. [51049]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme (PPRS) sets target rates of return for companies supplying branded medicines to the National Health Service around which there is a margin of tolerance. The prices of medicines reflect this indirectly. The overall return on capital (outturn) for companies' PPRS business was 18.1 per cent. for 1994 (the latest year for which full figures are available); further details are contained in the Second Report to Parliament on the PPRS (December 1997) copies of which are available in the Library.

Heart Transplants

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many heart transplant operations have been performed in the United Kingdom in each of the last three years. [51542]

Mr. Boateng: In 1995 there were 319 heart transplants and 58 heart/lung transplants; 278 heart and 53 heart/lung transplants in 1996; and 266 heart and 44 heart/lung transplants in 1997.

Dental Services

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the quality of root canal fillings carried out within the General Dental Service and of the level of remuneration for dentists for that work. [51534]

Mr. Milburn: The quality of all types of dental treatment from simple to complex, including root canal fillings, are regularly assessed on an individual patient sample basis by the Dental Reference Service. The level of remuneration for dental treatment is set down in a fee scale in the Statement of Dental Remuneration which is reviewed each year in the light of recommendations made by the Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body after considering evidence from both the dental profession and the Department.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to withdraw the use of aldehydes as an ingredient for root canal sealers within the National Health Service. [51535]

Mr. Milburn: This is a matter of clinical judgment. Dentists have a duty under the arrangements they make to provide general dental services to employ a proper degree of skill and attention and use only suitable materials.

Stroke Units

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many stroke units there are in the NHS; and where they are located. [51077]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* We do not collect data centrally on the numbers and distribution of specialist stroke units.

The organisation of health services, including services for people who have had a stroke, and the manner in which they are delivered are matters for health authorities, taking account of the needs of the local population and the priorities set for the use of the available resources.

The Clinical Standards Advisory Group published a report on clinical effectiveness on 3 June 1998, using stroke as a marker condition. The report contains recommendations to help ensure consistency of treatment across the country. This includes access to appropriate rehabilitation services, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, where they can effectively assist recovery.

Breast Implants

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the total costs to the public purse of the work undertaken by the Independent Review Group into silicone gel breast implants. [51674]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* The total cost to date of the work undertaken by the Independent Review Group into silicone gel breast implants is approximately £250,000.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the countries in which silicone gel breast implants have been banned. [51677]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* To our knowledge, the only country that currently has a ban on the use of silicone gel breast implants is France.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what budget will be allocated for the monitoring and registration of women by the National Breast Implant Registry over the next five years. [51675]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* It is not currently possible to estimate the budget required by the National Breast Implant Registry over the next five years. This will be decided once the Department and the Registry have assessed the resources necessary to implement the recommendation of the Independent Review Group on silicone gel breast implants.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the Annual Report and Accounts of the Medicines Control Agency. [52423]

Ms Jowell: We have received the report and copies have today been laid before both Houses of Parliament in accordance with the requirements of section 5(2) and 5(3) of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921. Copies have also been placed in the Library.

NHS Estates Executive Agency

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the Annual Report and Accounts for 1997–98 of the NHS Estates Executive Agency. [52574]

Mr. Milburn: We have received the report and copies have today been laid before both Houses of Parliament in accordance with section 5 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921. Copies have also been placed in the Library.

Head Lice

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representation he has received during the last 12 months on head lice; and what assessment he has made of current trends in the incidence of head lice in children of primary school age. [50766]

Ms Jowell: We have received occasional representations on the effect that head louse infestation can have upon children and their families. Information on trends in the number of cases of head lice amongst children of primary school age is not collected centrally. Cases are not notifiable and are generally detected and treated within the family home, making accurate counting difficult. The Department will continue to work with the Department for Education and Employment to promote best practice in detection and treatment of this problem.

Smoking

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the recommendations of the Fowler report, A Call for a More Effective Policy on Smoking Cessation and the Use of Nicotine Replacement Therapy; and if he will make a statement. [52044]

Ms Jowell: Our policies on these and other matters relating to smoking will be set out in a White Paper later in the year. Officials are studying the report and its recommendations.

NHS Pension Scheme

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost of including staff employed by general practitioner co-operatives in the NHS pension scheme; and if he will make a statement. [51790]

Mr. Milburn: The information to estimate the cost of including general practitioner co-operative staff in the National Health Service pension scheme is not available centrally.

Retired Consultants

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultants from ethnic minorities retired from the NHS in each of the last three years; and how many of these were receiving discretionary merit awards at the time of retirement. [51777]

Mr. Milburn: Data concerning medical staff retiring from the National Health Service each year are not collected centrally.

Euthanasia

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of allegations of involuntary euthanasia by *(a)* hospital staff and *(b)* general practitioners; and if he will make a statement. [51904]

Ms Jowell: Euthanasia is illegal. Anyone alleged to have undertaken such action would be open to a charge of murder or manslaughter.

It is the responsibility of the police to decide whether to bring charges in individual cases and for the Crown Prosecution Service to decide whether a prosecution should proceed.

We have no centrally available information on investigations into such allegations.

1995 EU Budget

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what factors led to his decision to continue the United Kingdom challenge to the EU Commission's use of the 1995 Budget to fund demonstration projects in the field of poverty and social exclusion. [50945]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 4 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *103*.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Papua New Guinea

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken to provide humanitarian aid to the people of Papua New Guinea. [51903]

Mr. Foulkes: We are in close contact with the Papua New Guinea authorities through the British High Commission in Port Moresby. In response to the initial appeal for assistance, we have offered up to £250,000 to meet the immediate recovery needs of those affected by the tidal wave. Of this contribution, £75,000 has been allocated to the International Federation of the Red Cross to provide family rehabilitation kits containing basic household items, and materials to rebuild houses. We have asked other humanitarian organisations active in the region urgently to submit proposals for the remaining funds.

We shall continue to monitor the situation closely through our High Commission and through the regular reports we receive from the United Nations and the Red Cross and are ready to consider any further appeals for assistance.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *533*, concerning the 150/500 KV sub-stations project in Indonesia, what has the project achieved to date; what is her assessment of the project's value for money; and if she will place in the Library copies of the project appraisal, monitoring and evaluation reports completed to date. [51733]

Mr. Foulkes: Of the 13 substation sites covered by the project, two have so far been completed and handed over to the Indonesian authorities. Constraints on local expenditure on civil works, as a result of the financial crisis, are delaying the completion of five sites and work on the remaining six has been suspended for twelve months. Discussions are continuing between DFID, the Indonesian authorities and the contractor to assess the situation and action required in response of it. It is not possible at this stage to make an assessment of value for money. I will place in the Library copies of the project memorandum, which contains information relevant to the appraisal of the project, and of monitoring reports to date.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list for *(a)* her Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49236]

Mr. Foulkes *[holding answer 6 July 1998]: (a)* The Department for International Development (DFID) owns no vehicles in the UK. The following details are in respect of vehicles owned by DFID's overseas offices. The figures do not include vehicles provided under the aid programme for the benefit of partner Governments.

	Number
Total owned	26
Petrol	17
Diesel	9
2000cc or less	14
Over 2000cc	12
Likely replacements in year	
1998–99	4
1999–2000	3
2000–2001	6

DFID does not lease any vehicles either in the UK or overseas.

(b) The only public body listed in the National Asset Register for which DFID is responsible which owns vehicles is the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC). The CDC owns a vehicle fleet worth in excess of £1 million dispersed across a large number of locations overseas. The details requested in respect of these vehicles could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Nuba Mountains, Sudan

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to secure access to the Nuba Mountains of Sudan for the purpose of humanitarian aid. [51536]

Mr. Foulkes: Britain and the rest of the donor community together with the United Nations are pressing the Government of Sudan to agree to a UN assessment of humanitarian needs in the Nuba Mountains; and to allow the necessary assistance to be delivered.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Payment of Bills

Mr. Purchase: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proportion of bills were paid on time by Government Departments and their agencies during the financial year 1997–98. [52148]

Mrs. Roche: I am pleased to announce that there has been an improvement in the payment performance of Central Government as a whole. The majority of Departments are now meeting the target of paying 95 per cent. of their suppliers bills on time.

There is no room for complacency, however. New tougher targets for Departments and their agencies will be set by my hon. Friend the Paymaster General, which will ensure that this improvement in performance continues.

The target for paying undisputed bills on time in the 1998–99 financial year will be 97.5 per cent. and for the 1999–2000 financial year 100 per cent.

We are committed to improving Britain's payment culture. It is important that the public sector sets an example to business and is seen to pay its bills on time.

Late payment is a serious problem for business and particularly for small businesses. Not knowing when customers' bills will be paid means uncertain cashflow, increased borrowings, higher costs and reduced profits.

Government Departments and their agencies are required to monitor their payment performance and to publish the results in their departmental or annual reports. The following table lists, by Department, the proportion of bills paid within 30 days, or other agreed credit period, of receipt of a valid invoice for financial year 1997–98. Similar information for earlier years is held in the House of Commons Library.

Departmental payment performance 1997–98

Department	*% of invoices paid on time*
Government Actuary's Department	100.0
National Investment and Loan Office	100.0
Privy Council Office	100.0
Office of Electricity Regulation	99.7
Office of National Lottery	99.7
Defence, Ministry of	98.9
Ordnance Survey	98.3
Trade and Industry, Department of	98.2
Insolvency Service[1]	98.9
Radiocommunications Agency[1]	96.1
Office of Gas Supply	98.2
Office of the Rail Regulator	98.0
Office for Standards in Education	97.3
Office of Water Services	98.0
Registry of Friendly Societies Commission	97.6
The Welsh Office	97.3
Treasury Solicitor's Department inc. Law Officers Department	97.3
Office of Telecommunications	97.0
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	96.9
Office of Passenger Rail Franchising	96.9
Intervention Board for Agricultural Produce	96.8
Serious Fraud Office	96.6
Education and Employment, Department for	96.5
Land Registry	96.3
Lord Chancellor's Department inc. Public Trustee Office	96.0
Charity Commission	96.0
Export Credits Guarantee Department	95.9
Home Office	95.6
Inland Revenue	95.6
National Savings Department	95.6
HM Customs and Excise	95.5
Health, Department of	95.3
Forestry Commission	95.3
Public Record Office	95.2
HM Treasury	95.1

Departmental payment performance 1997–98

Department	*% of invoices paid on time*
International Development, Department for	95.0
Crown Prosecution Service	95.0
Cabinet Office (inc. Office of Public Service)	94.7
Culture, Media and Sport, Department for	94.6
DETR	93.7
Health and Safety Executive[2]	91.0
The Scottish Office	93.6
Royal Mint	93.0
Office of Fair Trading	93.0
Northern Ireland Office	92.9
Crown Office, Scotland (inc. Lord Advocate's Department)	91.0
Social Security, Department of	90.7
National Statistics, Office for	89.4
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	83.8

[1] Insolvency Service and Radiocommunications Agency are Executive Agencies of the Department of Trade and Industry

[2] Health and Safety Executive is an Executive Agency for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Aerospace Industry

Mr. Borrow: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of *(a)* the contribution of the UK aerospace industry to the UK economy and *(b)* the role played in the past 10 years of the biennial Farnborough Airshow in securing business for the industry. [51194]

Mr. Battle: Aerospace is one of the most important high technology manufacturing sectors of the UK economy. It had a turnover of £15 billion last year (of which 75% is exported). This constitutes around 8% of the total turnover of the UK's engineering sector. The industry makes a positive contribution to the UK balance of trade of over £3 billion and, in 1997, it employed around 120,000 people.

Over the last ten years the UK industry's turnover has grown from £9.5 billion to the current £15 billion. Some 450 UK companies have exhibited at Farnborough over this period and, at the last show, some £1.8 billion of UK business was announced by the industry, which sees the show as an important competitive advantage for this sector of UK industry. The biennial Farnborough Airshow, which is organised by the Society of British Aerospace Companies, is the world's premier airshow and provides the industry with a vital shop window to display its products to customers around the world. The UK base which the Farnborough Airshow provides is an important competitive advantage for this sector of UK industry.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she intends to publish the results of consultations on the Working Time Directive. [51635]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* The views expressed in the responses to the consultation exercise on the draft regulations have been taken into account in finalising the regulations. These will be laid before Parliament before the recess.

Many respondents also asked for some issues to be clarified in the accompanying guidance. This will be published in the Summer.

Dounreay

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what date the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate memorandum, A Summary of the Dounreay FCA Inspection Findings, was brought to her attention; what assurances she *(a)* sought and *(b)* received from the HSE that Dounreay was a suitable destination for the waste from Georgia; what action she took in response to the document; and if she will make a statement. [46786]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 23 June 1998]:* The existence of this memorandum was first brought to my attention on 29 May 1998 and it was published by the Health and Safety Executive on 15 June 1998. HSE had sent a copy of the memorandum to DTI officials in June 1997 and they discussed its contents with UKAEA at the time, in particular to satisfy themselves that UKAEA had sufficient resources to address any necessary improvements at the Dounreay site.

The Health and Safety Executive was consulted before it was decided to accept the Georgian consignment, and it was satisfied that the material could be safely stored at Dounreay.

Many of the issues raised in the memorandum are now being scrutinised carefully by the safety audit being conducted by the Health and Safety Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Any recommendations arising from this audit will be made public, and I will expect UKAEA to take all appropriate action.

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the TRIGA fuel from Billingham to be reprocessed under Dounreay's contract with ICI has been delivered to Dounreay. [48035]

Mr. Battle: It has not been delivered. At present UKAEA are not accepting any new nuclear material onto the Dounreay site, and they will not do so until after they have satisfied their regulators.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Executive Agencies

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the executive agencies sold to private buyers since the inception of the Next Steps programme indicating *(a)* the date of the transaction, *(b)* the type of transaction, *(c)* the name of the buyer or buyers and *(d)* the price agreed. [51618]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Eleven agencies have been wholly sold and two agencies have been part sold to private buyers since the inception of the Next Steps programme. They are as listed.

Agency name	*Date of transaction*	*Type of Transaction*	*Name of buyer/buyers*	*Price agreed*
DVOIT	17 December 1993	Trade sale	EDS	£5.5 million
National Engineering Laboratory	1 November 1995	Trade sale	Assessment Services Limited	£1.95 million subject to adjustments as set out in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts which are under negotiation
Laboratory of the Government Chemist	31 March 1996	Share sale	LGC (Holdings) Limited	Baseline price of £0.36 million, subject to adjustments, payment of £1.96 million to LGC (Teddington) Ltd. and further possible payment of £0.3 million as set out in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts
Transport Research Laboratory	31 March 1996	Management buyout	Transport Research Foundation	£3.1 million
Natural Resources Institute	1 May 1996	Transfer of ownership	Consortium of the University of Greenwich, Edinburgh University, Imperial College and Wye College	There was no transfer of funds, but a nominal consideration was paid by Greenwich which is subject to an adjustment
Chessington Computer Centre	31 July 1996	Trade sale	A consortium comprising a management and employee buyout team, Integris UK and Close Brothers	£12.5 million £1.25 million which has been deferred until 31 December 1999
Occupational Health and Safety Agency	18 September 1996	Trade sale	BMI Health Services	£350,000
HMSO	30 September 1996	Trade sale	National Publishing Group plc—a consortium led by Electra Flemming	£54 million
Recruitment and Assessment Services Agency	30 September 1996	Trade sale	Capita Group plc	£7.25 million
Building Research Establishment	19 March 1997	Management buyout	Management buyout team	£1.7 million, subject to adjustments which are under negotiation

Agency name	Date of transaction	Type of Transaction	Name of buyer/buyers	Price agreed
Paymaster	1 April 1997	Share sale	EDS and Hogg Robinson PLC	£22.81 million
ADAS (all of ADAS's consultancy and laboratory services and all of its research and development work has been privatised)	2 April 1997	Management buyout	Management and employee buyout team	£23.5 million
DERA (Support Services Division was privatised)	25 April 1997	Trade sale	Cinven	£74 million

SCOTLAND

Health Service

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if health care purchasers are required to set health and safety performance standards in their contracts with NHS trusts. [51108]

Mr. Galbraith: Health and Safety statutory standards, which are not optional, are the responsibility of NHS Trusts and are not a matter for Health Boards.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if NHS trusts are required to include reports on their health and safety records in their annual reports. [51104]

Mr. Galbraith: No, but the information contained in the Annual Report is being reviewed.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many medical and nursing staff have worked in occupational health in the NHS in the last five years for which figures are available in *(a)* each health board and *(b)* Scotland; and what were the grades of those employees. [51115]

Mr. Galbraith: As the tables containing this information are rather lengthy, I am arranging for copies to be placed in the House Library.

Prison Accommodation

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the certified normal accommodation for each prison in Scotland *(a)* in 1998 and *(b)* for each of the next seven years. [51405]

Mr. McLeish: The concept of "certified normal accommodation" is not applied in the Scottish Prison Service. However, the official design capacities for prisons in Scotland together with projections to 1 April 2001 are as set out. Projections beyond that date are not available and will be dependent on a review of capacity in the light of prisoner number forecasts and the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Projected prisoner accommodation

	July 1998 Design capacity	*1999 Design capacity*	*2000 Design Capacity*	*2001 Design Capacity*
Establishment				
Aberdeen	148	163	163	163
Barlinnie[1]	998	1,019	1,019	996
Castle Huntly	150	150	150	150
Cornton Vale	217	217	217	217
Dumfries	150	150	150	150
Dungavel	135	135	135	135
Edinburgh[2]	558	643	643	643
Friarton	90	90	90	90
Glenochil (Adult)	496	496	496	496
Glenochil (YOI)	174	174	174	174
Greenock	233	239	239	239
Inverness	107	107	109	109
Kilmarnock[3]	0	500	500	500
Longriggend	176	176	176	176
Low Moss	396	396	396	396
Noranside	135	135	135	135
Penninghame	98	98	98	98
Perth	434	434	434	509
Peterhead	295	295	295	295
Peterhead Unit	10	10	10	10
Polmont[4]	490	490	490	490
Shotts	462	462	462	462
Shotts NIC	54	54	54	54
Shotts Unit	12	12	12	12
Scotland Total	6,018	6,645	6,647	6,699

[1] Includes 76 spaces in temporary accommodation

[2] Includes 46 spaces in temporary accommodation

[3] New prison opens in Spring 1999 and intake phased throughout the Summer

[4] Includes 30 spaces in temporary cellular accommodation and 38 in temporary dormitory accommodation

Ayr Road Route Compensation

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the sums of compensation paid to landowners in respect of the construction of the Ayr road route (M77). [51462]

Mr. McLeish: Individual sums of compensation paid to landowners are confidential and cannot be disclosed without their prior consent. In the case of M77 Ayr Road Route compensation payments for the section of the route within Glasgow City Boundary prior to 1 April 1996 were made by Strathclyde Regional Council and subsequently by Glasgow City Council. My right hon. Friend has no knowledge or records of these payments, although he is responsible for meeting the compensation payments on the section of the M77 south of the city boundary to Malletsheugh.

Trees

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will assess the advantage of amending legislation to allow complaints relating to the height or

position of trees to be actionable in terms of the Statutory Nuisance provisions of the current Environmental Protection Act 1990 or the Public Health (Scotland) Act 1897. [51461]

Mr. Macdonald: At present, there are no plans to introduce amendments to statutory nuisance legislation. Existing provisions within the statutory nuisance elements of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 allow local authorities to investigate complaints about possible statutory nuisance occurring on premises, which includes land within its area. If satisfied that such nuisance exists, or is likely to occur or recur, they must serve an abatement notice on the person responsible. Any person can make a complaint to their local authority Environmental Health Department, or alternatively they may make a summary application to the sheriff court about the existence of a statutory nuisance. Although not tested at law so far as I am aware, depending on the particular circumstances of the case, it is possible that a local authority could consider a nuisance was being caused by the height of trees. However, ultimately the decision as to what constitutes a nuisance is for the courts. The statutory nuisance provisions in the Public Health (Scotland) Act 1897 were repealed by the Environment Act 1995.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact of payment ceilings on the take up of environmental grants in ESAs. [51532]

Mr. Macdonald: We have monitored the impact of payment ceilings carefully since the inception of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme. There is no evidence that the maximum amounts which apply to payments under the Scheme have had a restrictive effect on uptake.

Agri-environmental Programmes

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what plans he has to increase the resources available to the Countryside Premium Scheme; [51530]

(2) if he will publish his budget allocation for agri-environmental programmes for 1998–99. [51533]

Mr. Macdonald: The provision for the Scottish agri-environment programme for 1998–99 is £13 million (as compared with £9.7 million in 1997–98). Of this, £5 million is allocated to the Countryside Premium Scheme (£2.5 million in 1997–98). Decisions on allocations for individual schemes within the agri-environment programme, including the Countryside Premium Scheme, post 1999 cannot be finalised until Agenda 2000 negotiations are completed. Meantime, following the Comprehensive Spending Review, spending on the agri-environment programme is planned to increase to £22 million by 2001–02.

Prison Staff

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the staff to prisoner ratio *(a)* in each prison and *(b)* in total in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [51746]

Mr. McLeish: The information requested is in the table.

Staff to prisoner ratio

Establishments	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*
Aberdeen	1:1.2	1:1.2	1:1.1
Barlinnie	1:2	1:2.2	1:2.2
Castle Huntly	1:1.5	1:1.5	1:1
Cornton Vale	1:0.7	1:0.8	1:0.8
Dumfries	1:0.9	1:0.9	1:0.8
Dungavel	1:1.2	1:1.2	1:1.4
Edinburgh	1:1.6	1:1.7	1:1.5
Friarton	1:1.1	1:1.3	1:1.2
Glenochil	1:1.3	1:1.3	1:1.2
Greenock	1:1.4	1:1.5	1:1.5
Inverness	1:1.3	1:1.2	1:1.1
Longriggend	1:0.9	1:0.9	1:1
Low Moss	1:2.2	1:2.2	1:2.1
Noranside	1:1.7	1:1.8	1:1.7
National Induction Centre[1]	1:1.1	1:1.2	1:0.4
Penninghame	1:1.3	1:1.3	1:1.5
Perth	1:1.1	1:1.1	1:1.1
Peterhead (including unit)	1:0.8	1:0.8	1:0.8
Polmont	1:1.4	1:1.5	1:1.1
Shotts (including unit)	1:1.1	1:1.1	1:1.1
Total	1:1.3	1:1.4	1:1.3

[1] The National Induction Centre opened in May 1995 and became fully operational later that year

Rehabilitation

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many prisoners completed *(a)* sex offender treatment programmes and *(b)* programmes accredited as helping rehabilitation in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [51744]

Mr. McLeish: The Scottish Prison Service has key performance indicators for the numbers of prisoners completing sex offender programmes and cognitive skills programmes. However, targets in this area were established only from 1996–97 onwards, and reliable figures for earlier years are not available centrally.

The figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are shown in the table.

Programme	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Sex offenders	67	91
Cognitive skills	381	635

Although other programmes aimed at reducing reoffending are also available, detailed information on the numbers of prisoners completing such programmes is not held centrally at present.

Recidivism

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the recidivism rates of custodial and non-custodial sentences in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [51660]

Mr. McLeish: A study of recidivism rates among a sample of offenders released from custodial sentences "Predicting Recidivism in a Scottish Prison Sample" was

published in 1997. A study of life sentence prisoners has been commissioned and will include an analysis of reconvictions.

A number of studies which aim to evaluate the impact of non-custodial disposals have been commissioned. Evaluations of two community based intervention programmes for persistent young offenders were commissioned in 1995 and will consider reconviction rates as part of the evaluation. An evaluation of pilot programmes for diversion from prosecution to social work and other services was commissioned earlier this year and will assess the effectiveness of the programmes in changing offender behaviour and reducing re-offending.

Evaluation of effectiveness will continue to be an important part of the criminal justice research programme.

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *145–46*, what assessment he has made of the reasons for the increase between 1994 and 1996 of those prosecuted and charged with driving a motor vehicle while unfit through drink or drugs. [51848]

Mr. McLeish: No specific assessment has been made of the reasons for the increase between 1994 and 1996 in the number of prosecutions for the offence of driving a motor vehicle while unfit through drink or drugs. The increase is believed to reflect a better awareness by the police of the types of driving and behaviour displayed by drivers who are unfit through drink or drugs, leading to an increase in the number of drivers who are charged and then prosecuted.

Chapelcross Nuclear Power Station

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what quantities of tritium were discharged from Chapelcross Nuclear Power Station in each month since January 1990. [51597]

Mr. Macdonald: SEPA has maintained monthly records of discharges of tritium since January 1996. That information is given in the following table, in units of radioactivity discharged per month.

	Gaseous TBq	*Aqueous TBq*
January 1996	131.1	0.0000
February 1996	118.0	0.0064
March 1996	63.9	0.0000
April 1996	75.1	0.0034
May 1996	65.5	0.0057
June 1996	76.2	0.0090
July 1996	131.4	0.0000
August 1996	68.3	0.0223
September	117.9	0.0052
October 1996	48.2	0.0083
November 1996	127.6	0.1276
December 1996	100.2	0.1798
January 1997	46.6	0.0176
February 1997	47.9	0.0000
March 1997	118.1	0.0076
April 1997	82.9	0.0041
May 1997	62.6	0.0000
June 1997	49.0	0.0092
July 1997	108.7	0.0155
August 1997	119.9	0.0035
September 1997	134.8	0.0000
October 1997	111.7	0.0115
November 1997	52.9	0.0037
December 1997	95.7	0.1255
January 1998	98.7	0.1836
February 1998	67.6	0.0000
March 1998	50.4	0.0024
April 1998	78.7	0.0073
May 1998	103.9	0.0059

Prior to 1996, information on discharges from Chapelcross was published by The Scottish Office in the series of Statistical Bulletins entitled "Radioactive Waste Disposals from Nuclear Sites in Scotland". The discharge information was supplied by year, although the report was not an annual publication. Copies of the reports are available in the House Library.

TREASURY

Public Investment

13. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for public investment for 1999–2000. [50499]

25. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the proposals relating to capital expenditure in the comprehensive spending review. [50512]

31. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for public investment. [50518]

33. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for public investment for the next three years. [50520]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Investing In Britain Fund will—within the Government's tough fiscal rules—double net public investment over the lifetime of this Parliament, providing for the renewal, reform and modernisation of the public infrastructure.

34. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the Comprehensive Spending Review and its impact on levels of public infrastructure investment. [50521]

Mr. Darling: The Government consulted widely during the course of the Review. The outcome of the review has underlined the Government's commitment to renew, reform and modernise the country's infrastructure through the Investing in Britain Fund which will—within the fiscal rules—double net public investment by the end of the Parliament.

Exchange Rate

14. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met employers to discuss the implications of the current exchange rate. [50500]

Mrs. Liddell: Treasury Ministers receive many representations from business organisations. The Government listen carefully to all viewpoints and

experiences, and fully recognise the worries of exporters and manufacturers about the current level of the exchange rate.

Bingham Report

15. **Mr. Vaz:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date he proposes to publish the confidential parts of the Bingham report. [50501]

Mr. Darling: The appendices to the Bingham report contain information that was supplied in confidence. At the outset of the inquiry, Lord Bingham's invitation to submit evidence made it clear he would respect confidentiality. I do not believe we can now break that undertaking. To do so would compromise future inquiries. However, Lord Bingham did draw on all the information supplied to him when preparing his report and reaching his conclusions.

Public Spending

16. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the priorities for public spending over the planning period contained in the comprehensive spending review. [50503]

Mr. Darling: The Government received a very wide range of views during the course of the Review and Members of the House have made their views known on many different issues. The terms of reference were made available early in the process and individual departments approached interested bodies. Extensive consultation was conducted with experts and outsiders as part of the CSR process.

21. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the reordering of priorities for public spending as a result of the comprehensive spending review. [50508]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) today, *Official Report*, column 1244.

Savings

17. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to encourage the growth of the level of savings. [50504]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's economic policy is set to achieve stability and the right conditions in which individuals can save with confidence. Our plans for the Individual Savings Account (ISA) are specifically designed to develop and extend the savings habit.

22. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy on tax relief for savings. [50509]

Mrs. Liddell: This Government's policy is to encourage individuals to save. We believe tax-free saving can play a part in this and we are introducing the new individual savings account for this purpose.

27. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received in support of his proposals for CAT marking of ISA financial products; and when he expects to produce his final regulations. [50514]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury has received 143 responses to the consultation document "Making Saving Easy". The CAT standards will be finalised once those responses have been analysed.

Dividend Tax Credits

19. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from charities regarding the abolition of dividend tax credits. [50506]

Mrs. Liddell: We know that many charities regret the effects of this reform for them. We made generous transitional arrangements for charities last year. About 250 charities have written about tax credits.

Personal Taxation

20. **Mr. Colvin:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for the simplification of personal taxation. [50507]

Mrs. Liddell: Income tax rates and allowances, along with other aspects of the tax system, are kept under review. Ways to simplify the system are considered as part of the review process.

Scotch Whisky (Taxation)

23. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has held with the Scotch whisky industry relating to the level of tax on Scotch whisky. [50510]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Financial Secretary to the Treasury met representatives of the Scotch Whisky Association on 24 February to discuss the level of duty in the run up to the Budget. Officials at Customs and Excise meet the association regularly to discuss all aspects of spirits duty.

Public Debt

24. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what basis he has determined that a prudent level for public debt is less than 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. [50511]

Mr. Darling: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has explained to the House, the Government's policy on public debt combines prudence and stability in the public finances with investment and reform in public services.

Capital Projects (Private Finance)

26. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to replace public funding of capital projects in health and education with private finance. [50513]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: As we said in "Modern Public Services for Britain: Investing in Reform", the deciding factor is whether public or private investment offers the best means of securing improved public services. This is the test that my hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education will apply when planning future capital investment for which their Departments are responsible.

Capital Expenditure

28. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he intends to take to promote capital expenditure projects. [50515]

Mr. Darling: The Investing in Britain Fund will—within the Government's tough fiscal rules—double net public investment over the Parliament to renew, reform and modernise the national infrastructure. This will be enhanced by the role of PFI/PPPs in providing public investment and services.

Charities Taxation

29. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to complete his review of charities taxation. [50516]

Mrs. Liddell: The Review of Charities' Taxation will be completed following a public consultation exercise, phase II of which will start later this year.

Cross-border Savings (EU Tax)

30. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy on the European Commission's proposal for a Europe-wide withholding tax on cross-border savings. [50517]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are in favour of international co-operation in effective action against tax evasion. However, we are determined to protect European Community financial markets against damage by provisions which might be ineffective if confined to the Community. We are holding urgent discussions with the financial sector on the likely impact of the current proposals.

Strong Pound

32. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the impact of the strength of the pound on manufacturing industry. [50519]

Mrs. Liddell: Treasury Ministers receive many representations from business organisations. The Government listen carefully to all viewpoints and experience, and fully recognise the worries of exporters and manufacturers about the current level of the exchange rate.

Resources (Regional Distribution)

35. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations his Department has received on the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review on the regional distribution of resources, with particular reference to Lincolnshire. [50522]

Mr. Darling: The Government consulted extensively in the course of the review. The regional distribution of resources is a matter for spending departments. But the plans announced in the outcome of the Comprehensive Review will provide investment, modernisation and reform for the whole country.

Pensions

36. **Mr. Webb:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the mis-selling of free-standing additional voluntary contributions to pension schemes. [50523]

Mrs. Liddell: I have received one representation.

Design, Technology and Innovation Investment

37. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what incentives he is assessing to stimulate investment in design, technology and innovation. [50524]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The Government issued a consultative document "Innovating for the Future" on Budget Day, which sought views from business and others on ways of improving the UK record on R&D and innovation.

The Government are currently considering responses to the consultation document as part of their wider review of R&D.

Inland Revenue Offices

38. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the provision of Inland Revenue offices in remote rural locations. [50525]

Mrs. Liddell: The Inland Revenue is looking at the way it organises its work following the outcome of its Strategic Review, which Ministers recently approved as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. The Department generally expects to maintain a presence in those locations where it is currently represented.

Taxation (Investment Income)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to allow non-tax payers, of all ages, to continue to be able to reclaim a 10 per cent. tax credit on investment income from April 1999. [51575]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* As I said at the Report stage of the Finance Bill I was sympathetic to the case of non-taxpayers who will be affected by the withdrawal of payable tax credits from 6 April 1999, and I have the matter under review. That remains the position.

ICL Pathway Project

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *570*, if the Government are assessing alternative options to the ICL Pathway Project. [51497]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The ICL Pathway project is designed to introduce a modern method of benefit payment over post office counters, reducing fraud and improving efficiency. The Government are fully committed to achieving these objectives.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the future of the ICL Pathway Project. [51491]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *570*.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *570*, what representations he has received on the progress of the ICL Pathway Project. [51490]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The Treasury has received no representations on the progress of this project other than through discussions with the parties involved.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 9 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *570*, which outside consultants the Government have employed to assist in the monitoring of the ICL Pathway Project. [51498]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The Government have employed consultants with expertise in IT project management to assist in the monitoring of the ICL Pathway project.

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49235]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The information is as follows:

(a) Vehicles owned or leased by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Departments

Cubic capacity	*Fuel type*	*Number*
(i) Owned		
less than 1000cc	Petrol	3
1000cc to 2000cc	Petrol	2,331
2001cc to 3000cc	Petrol	64
3001cc to 4000cc	Petrol	10
Over 4001cc	Petrol	2
less than 1000cc	Diesel	3
1000cc to 2000cc	Diesel	997
2001cc to 3000cc	Diesel	179
3001cc to 4000cc	Diesel	2
Over 4001cc	Diesel	1
	Total	3,592

(ii) Leased

Currently the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Departments do not lease any vehicles

(b) Bodies listed in the National Asset Register The Bank of England; National Savings

Cubic capacity	*Fuel type*	*Number*
(i) Owned		
1000cc to 2000cc	Petrol	2
2001cc to 3000cc	Petrol	5
3001cc to 4000cc	Petrol	2
1000cc to 2000cc	Diesel	1
2001cc to 3000cc	Diesel	5
250bhp	Diesel	5
	Total	20
(ii) Leased		
1000cc to 2000cc	Petrol	3
2001cc to 3000cc	Petrol	1
	Total	4

The total number of vehicles currently utilised by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Departments is 3,616

Vehicles falling due for replacement

Year	*Number*
1998–99	941
1999–2000	944
2000–01	955

Bank of England, Cardiff Bay

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 61, on the Bank of England, what is the length of the lease and the amount of passing rent expressed in £ per square foot per annum for the Bank of England Office for Wales. [51231]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The Bank of England has a 15 year lease on the offices at Scott Harbour, Cardiff Bay. The passing rent is £16.50 per sq ft per annum.

Disabled Persons Tax Credit

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the planned entitlement criteria for the disabled persons tax credit; [51983]

(2) how his Department plans to structure review and appeals procedures under the disabled persons tax credit; [51978]

(3) how changes of circumstance affecting the claimants eligibility will be accounted for in the administration of the disabled persons tax credit; [51985]

(4) how much money his Department plans to invest in information campaigns for the disabled persons tax credit; and how information campaigns will be targeted; [51991]

(5) if the capital owned by *(a)* the disabled claimant and *(b)* their partner will be taken into account for the purposes of calculating the disabled persons tax credit; [51986]

(6) what measures his Department is taking to ensure the disabled persons tax credit functions as an incentive to move from out of work benefits into work; [51984]

(7) what anti-fraud strategies are being assessed in the design of the disabled persons tax credit; [51987]

(8) if the disabled persons tax credit will be directly accessible for people moving from *(a)* the New Deal for Sick and Disabled people and *(b)* incapacity benefit; [51982]

(9) how the Department plans to ensure the confidentiality of applicants for the disabled persons tax credit with respect to their employers; [51980]

(10) what consultation has taken place between his Department and disability organisations regarding the disabled persons tax credit; [51981]

(11) if the passporting features of disability working allowance on to other benefits, are planned to be retained under the disabled persons tax credit; [51979]

(12) if the income of claimants' partners will be considered for the purposes of calculating the disabled persons tax credit. [51988]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply he received from the Financial Secretary on 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *650*.

Indirect Taxation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *135–36*, on indirect taxation, if he will provide forecasts for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99. [51728]

Mrs. Liddell: Forecasts of tax receipts, including indirect taxes, in 1997–98 and 1998–99 were published in Table B9 of the March 1998 "Financial Statement and Budget Report". However, forecasts of indirect taxes paid per person derived from these figures will not be fully consistent with those given to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire, (Mr. Barnes) by the Director of the Office for National Statistics on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *135–36*, which were based on data from the Family Expenditure Survey.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the estimated number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women working in the Greater London area who will benefit from the proposed national minimum wage. [51649]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 23 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the proposed national minimum wage.

The proposed national minimum wage (NMW) which is due to come into effect in April 1999 has been set at £3.60 per hour for workers aged over 21. A development rate of £3.00 per hour has been proposed for those aged 18 to 21. Workers aged 16 to 17 and all those on apprenticeships will be exempt.

Estimates of the number of employees below the NMW thresholds have been based upon the results of the Spring 1997 Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the April 1997 New Earnings Survey which are currently the latest available sources, and have used the methodology described in David Wilkinson's article in the May 1998 issue of *Labour Market Trends*. Copies of *Labour Market Trends* are available in the House of Commons Library.

The estimated numbers of men and women in the Greater London area who earn less than the proposed NMW are set out in the following table. To reflect the uncertainty, the estimates are expressed in the form of a range, based on the sampling errors associated with the surveys from which the estimates have ben derived. In order to ensure comparability with the proposed NMW rates which would come into force in April 1999 the analysis in the table is based upon hourly rates of £2.80 and £3.40 which use the Low Pay Commission's methodology to take into account inflation between April 1997 and April 1999.

Estimates of number of employees aged 18 to 21 earning below £2.80 and employees aged over 21 earning below £3.40 in Greater London in April 1997

	Lower estimate	*Upper estimate*
Males	51,000	85,000
Females	57,000	74,000

The above estimates do not take into account workers aged over 21 who whilst receiving accredited training during the first six months of a new job with a new employer would under NMW proposals be entitled to a rate of £3.20 per hour in April 1999.

Death Certificates

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer If he will issue guidance on the consistent completion of death certificates, when the death occurred in hospital, in respect of the contributory and principal causes of death. [49899]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, dated 23 July 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on guidance on the consistent completion of death certificates, when the death occurred in hospital, in respect of the contributory and principal causes of death.

The ONS places great importance on the quality of the information collected through the deaths registration system and constantly seeks to ensure that this remains fit for purpose, reliable and authoritative.

Guidance notes on completion are contained in every book of death certificates. This meets the legal obligations for the inclusion of such instruction and the recommendations of the World Health Organisation. These notes were last updated in 1997.

In July 1997, the Deputy Chief Medical Statistician wrote to all consultants and principals in general practice reminding them of the need to certify deaths promptly and accurately, to refer deaths to the coroner for further investigation where appropriate, and also to remind them of the existence of the guidance notes in each booklet of death certificates.

The ONS recently produced a video and reading material entitled "Deaths counts", aimed at medical students and doctors, to teach them how to complete the death certificates, including the legal obligations on doctors and registrars. These have been sent to all medical schools and post-graduate deans in England and Wales.

National Savings

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment has been made of the interaction between possible private sector involvement in National Savings' operational services and changes to its financial products. [51809]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of National Savings. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Peter Bareau to Mr. Gordon Marsden, dated 23 July 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question 51809 about the assessment that has been made of the interaction between possible private sector involvement in National Savings' Operational Services and changes to its financial products.

The Invitation to Negotiate issued to the bidders specified the requirement that they should provide the flexibility to introduce new products quickly and economically. Their response to this request will be a key element of the evaluation of proposals.

While EDS and Siemens have been invited to bid for their administration, any change to the design of savings products would remain the responsibility of National Savings, which will continue to be a Government Agency.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

TECs

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made on the review of training and enterprise councils in England. [52421]

Dr. Howells: The Government issued a consultation document on 9 July 1998 on the future role of TECs/CCTEs in meeting our strategic objectives. Copies of the document have been circulated widely to the many organisations and individuals with whom TECs work at local, regional, national and sectoral level. We have asked for comments by 30 September so that we can take them into account before issuing new Strategic Guidance for TECs in the Autumn. Copies of the consultation document have also been placed in the Library and sent to all Members.

Employment Service

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Employment Service Annual Report and Accounts for 1997–98 will be laid before Parliament. [52420]

Mr. Blunkett: I have today laid before the House the Employment Service's Annual Report and Accounts for 1997–98 which give full details of the Agency's performance and expenditure for that year.

The Annual Report notes the very significant achievements of the Employment Service in 1997–98. In particular, the Employment Service prepared for and launched the Government's New Deal for young unemployed people in twelve pathfinder areas within some 160 working days of the Government taking office. Subsequently it has successfully launched nationally the New Deal programmes for both young and long-term unemployed people. This has involved the Employment Service working in partnership with a wide range of public, voluntary and private sector organisations to make the best possible help available to our young people.

The Agency has also played a key role in implementing the Government's wider Welfare to Work agenda involving Employment Zones, the New Deal for lone parents, and the New Deal for disabled people, all of which have started, or are due to start, this year.

At the same time, the Report notes that the Employment Service maintained its existing services and helped many people to find work. In 1997–98 the Employment Service handled 2.7 million job vacancies and placed nearly 1.4 million unemployed people into work, including some 300,000 people who had been unemployed for more than six months, and 83,000 people with disabilities.

Although the Employment Service did not succeed in meeting all of its targets for the number of unemployed people placed into jobs, its performance should be seen in the context of rapidly falling unemployment over the year and the action the Employment Service has taken to ensure that job placings are recorded strictly in accordance with its procedures. I have underlined to the Employment Service the importance, in the current year, of improved performance against targets, successful implementation of the New Deal programmes and continued rigour on the accurate recording of job placings, building on the action taken which has reduced the scale of this problem very substantially over the past year.

Overall, 1997–98 was a highly successful year for the Employment Service. I am also particularly pleased that, by the end of 1997–98, overall customer service results were at record levels. As the Chief Executive points out in his Report, none of this would have been possible without the quite remarkable effort and commitment from people throughout the Employment Service. I too am very grateful to them.

Scottish Fee Support Review Committee

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to announce the Chairman of the Scottish Fee Support Review Committee to be established under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. [52543]

Mr. Blunkett: I and my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Northern Ireland and for Wales are pleased to confirm that Sir George Quigley has agreed to chair the independent committee to be set up under Section 25(4) of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 to review financial support for fees for students in the final honours year of first degree courses at Scottish institutions. Other members will be announced at a later date.

New Deal

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many New Deal clients have taken up voluntary sector placements or work on the environmental task force in Cornwall; [51816]

(2) how many New Deal clients have gone into full-time training or education in Cornwall; [51817]

(3) how many *(a)* subsidised and *(b)* unsubsidised jobs have been offered by employers to the Employment Service for the New Deal in Cornwall. [51818]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government Statistical Service figures for clients leaving Gateway to go into jobs show that, to the end of May 1998, 233 young people have gone into unsubsidised employment and 192 into subsidised jobs.

To the end of May 1998, 65 New Deal clients have started the Full-Time Education and Training (FTET) Option, 28 have started the Environment Task Force (ETF) Option, and 41 have started the Voluntary Sector (VS) Option.

Smoking (School Education)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been his Department's expenditure on school education on the dangers of smoking during the last 12 months. [51867]

Ms Estelle Morris: The dangers of smoking form a vital part of education about drugs. We have made increased support of £7 million available to LEAs this financial year, through the Standards Fund programme, to assist primary and secondary schools and the youth service to deliver effective education about drugs. This builds on the £6 million of support which has been made available each year since 1995–96 through the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme to fund LEA's drug education initiatives, including teacher training and innovative projects.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the selection of candidates for training as millennium bug busters; who is responsible for their training; what is the standard and qualification they will obtain; and how they will be matched to job opportunities. [51858]

Dr. Howells: Employers participating in the Millennium Bug Training initiative will select which of their employees to put forward for training. The training is delivered through providers, and to specific standards, that have been approved by the Information Technology National Training Organisation (IT NTO). Certificates that contribute to national and industry recognised qualifications will be issued upon successful completion of the course.

Internet (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects all children in Gloucestershire schools to have ready access to the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [50068]

Dr. Howells: The Government's consultation paper 'Connecting the Learning Society' set out a target date of 2002 for the connection of all schools, colleges, universities and libraries and as many community centres as possible to be connected to the National Grid for Learning via the Internet.

The Department is supporting £750,000 of ICT-related expenditure in Gloucestershire in 1998–99 through Standards Fund Grant for the National Grid for Learning. The grant is to support networking and infrastructure, and is funded equally by the Department and the relevant local education authority.

Key Stage 1

Mr. Dorrell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools did not submit results of Key Stage 1 tests for moderation in 1997. [40942]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* 92 maintained mainstream schools did not submit 1997 Key Stage 1 National Curriculum Assessment results. The number of schools not submitting results is falling year on year, and the 1997 figure is less than half that for 1996. The corresponding figures for 1995 and 1996, are 401 and 189 respectively. It is not possible to determine the number of special schools who did not submit results, as it is impossible to differentiate between those schools whose pupils were all disapplied from the National Curriculum Assessments, and therefore had no results to return, and those schools who chose not to return results. Participation by independent schools in the National Curriculum Assessment tests is voluntary and, therefore, they have not been included in this analysis.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

School Sports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many schools in England play *(a)* cricket and *(b)* rugby league. [51293]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* Neither this Department nor the Department for Education and Employment collects this kind of information.

Tourism

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what amount of EU funding has been used for tourism information technology initiatives in the United Kingdom in the last year for which figures are available. [51544]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The figure is not available in the form requested. However, £31 million of European Regional Development Funding (ERDF) is available in the current year for DCMS policy areas, of which tourism is the main beneficiary.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice his Department gives to *(a)* tourist boards and *(b)* tourist information centres who wish to set up compatible computerised booking systems. [51555]

Mr. Tom Clarke: DCMS sponsors the English Tourist Board (ETB) which has established a Tourism Technology Forum. The Forum comprises representatives of public and private destination marketing organisations as well as commercial systems developers and is looking at issues concerning compatibility and information exchange.

The ETB has appointed a Tourism Technology Co-ordinator to provide impartial advice to Tourist Information Centre Managers about the availability of systems and has produced a report, analysing the functions and costs of existing systems.

The Tourism Technology Forum has established a working group and is investigating the commercial viability of reservation systems. A planned Tourist Boards

Intranet is currently under development and should be completed shortly, through which information and experience of booking systems will be shared.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the number of local tourist information centres which provide web pages for their area on the Internet. [51554]

Mr. Tom Clarke: None. However, the English Tourist Board, in collaboration with the Local Government Association and the Tourism Management Institute, has recently surveyed all Tourist Information Centres (TICs) and Local Authority Tourism Departments to establish the extent to which new technology is being used in the promotion and management of tourism destinations. 55 per cent. of TIC respondents and 50 per cent. of local authority respondents indicated they had a website.

BBC Archives

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Medi and Sport what steps he is taking to encourage the BBC to allow increased access by academics and other scholars to the BBC's archive material. [51648]

Mr. Fisher: The obligations placed on the BBC in respect of its archives are set out in the Royal Charter and Agreement. These include broad requirements to establish and maintain archives containing material relevant to the objects of the Corporation, and to make reasonable arrangements for public access to the archives, with or without charge. How the BBC chooses to meet these obligations is a matter for the Corporation itself.

Grants and Awards (Wakefield)

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the grants and awards that require bids from applicants which his Department is responsible for administering and awarding *(a)* nationally and *(b)* that people and groups within Wakefield Metropolitan District are eligible to bid for; if he will publish the deadlines for these applications; and if he will produce this list on a regular basis. [51269]

Mr. Fisher: The only grants of this type which we administer are the Museums Challenge Fund, set up to assist the national museums and galleries in England which currently offer free access to continue to do so; the DCMS/Wolfson Foundation Public Libraries Challenge Fund, available to all local authorities in England and with a deadline for 1998–99 of 12 June 1998; and the Heritage Grant Fund in England.

Grants from the Heritage Grant Fund are normally restricted to national voluntary organisations or to voluntary bodies undertaking projects of national significance.

Exceptionally, local organisations may be awarded a grant for projects which are particularly innovative and may be used as an exemplar. This year's scheme is likely to have a deadline of the end of September. Individual grant schemes receive wide publicity, and we have no plans to produce a list of this sort on a regular basis.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many letters per day her office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50689]

Mr. Field: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

The correspondence section attached to Minsters' offices, which has 14 staff, receives all correspondence and seeks advice from officials, including those in the Policy Correspondence Unit which had 38 staff at 1 June 1998. Other units and officials elsewhere in the Department also deal with correspondence as part of their normal duties.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to review the assessment procedure determining eligibility for incapacity benefit. [51411]

Mr. Denham: We have made clear our intention to reform Incapacity Benefit for future claimants, to develop a more effective test which assesses what sick and disabled people are able to do, and not just what they cannot do. The information which a new test would provide on people's capacity could then be used to give them the help they need to improve their employability and return to work.

Disabled People

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to introduce a disabled persons tax credit disregard in the assessment of means-tested social security benefits. [51989]

Mr. Denham: The Disabled Persons Tax Credit will replace Disability Working Allowance from October 1999.

There is no disregard of payments of Disability Working Allowance when assessing eligibility for other income-related benefits. To do so would duplicate payments from public funds for the same purpose. There are no plans to change this policy.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if confirmation has been given to all successful organisations that bid to execute pilot projects under the New Deal for sick and disabled people. [51990]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Social Security, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced the ten successful bidders for the first tranche of Innovative Schemes funded under the New Deal for Disabled People on 16 July. The schemes are as follows: Leonard Cheshire Workability; Centrica North West Project; Status Employment Ltd; Back to Work proposed by Libra Health Ltd; Manchester Mental Health in Employment Project proposed by Manchester TEC;

West of England Centre for Integrated Living; Disability Business Partnerships proposed by RNIB; Urban World proposed by Grimsby College; Integration for Opportunity—Jobs4All proposed by Thurso College; and Gateway Partnerships proposed by Disability Matters Ltd.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Aylesbury will receive a substantive reply from the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency to the letter of 7 May to the Dudley CSA office about case reference 1008385662; and if she will make a statement. [50873]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Mr. David Lidington, dated 22 July 1998:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about your letter of 7th May (case reference 1008385662) to the Child Support Agency Business Unit Manager in Dudley.

The Agency aim to respond to letters from Members of Parliament within 20 working days. I am afraid this did not happen in this case and I apologise for this.

In this particular case, information needed to be sought from the non-resident parent's employer, and a written agreement regarding the arrears of child support maintenance needed to be obtained from the parent with care before a full response could be made. While investigations were being made the Midland Business Unit Manager sent two interim replies explaining that investigations were still being made. A full response to your letter was made on 14 July.

Benefits Agency

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what guidance she plans to issue to the Benefits Agency on its forthcoming obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to produce generic benefits information and information on individual benefits in a range of formats which blind and partially sighted people can access; [50923]

(2) what assessment she has made of the difficulties which blind and partially sighted people have in obtaining access to information on benefits. [51023]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Rev. Martin Smyth, dated 22 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what guidance she plans to issue to the Benefits Agency (BA) on its forthcoming obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to produce generic benefits information and information on individual benefits in a range of formats which blind and partially sighted people can access; and what assessment she has made of the difficulties which blind and partially-sighted people have in obtaining access to information on benefits.

The BA is currently overhauling its leaflet programme to improve the standard of information that we provide for all our customers by simplifying the range of materials and focusing it entirely to the customers' needs. To continue equal access to the social security system, the Agency plans to produce the new material for various customer groups in large print, audio cassette and Braille.

The BA regularly conducts formal customer research and consults with customer representative organisations about their information needs. We have also looked at the benefit information needs of blind and partially sighted people as part of the customer research for Project Access, which aims to simplify the range of materials we provide for customers.

The research explored how information should be provided, to whom it should be targeted and how it should be distributed.

Consultation with customer representative organisations for various groups, including blind and partially sighted people, has also been part of the research process. Products are being developed in response to their feedback.

The policy of Project Access will ensure that existing products will not be withdrawn until we are confident that the new information in alternative formats replaces them in an acceptable way for the various groups.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the additional annual cost of administering a one-off winter fuel payment. [51822]

Mr. Denham: Winter Fuel Payments are one of a number of initiatives the Government have taken to help vulnerable people, especially the elderly, keep warm in the winter. A total of £400 million was committed for two years (1997–98 and 1998–99), to help pensioners with fuel bills to pay.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in the House on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 704, a further £0.5 billion has been allocated to extend the scheme beyond next winter. This will provide each eligible pensioner household with a £20 winter fuel payment.

The administration of winter fuel payments is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Rendel, dated 22 July 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what is the additional annual cost of administering a one-off Winter Fuel Payment.

Last winter, Winter Fuel Payments were made to almost ten million eligible pensioners. The total administration cost of the exercise was in the region of £20 million. The annual average cost of making each payment was approximately £2.

I hope that this is helpful.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Environmental Performance (Small Businesses)

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to improve the environmental performance of small business. [52005]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are to revamp their support to small businesses to help them improve their energy efficiency and environmental performance. The Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme has an established reputation for helping businesses to improve their energy efficiency. The Programme is currently stimulating savings of around £500m each year across the

economy. We now want to make the benefits of this programme more readily available to small and medium sized businesses by building up a network of locally based consultants who will be accessed through a freephone hotline.

These new arrangements, which replace the smaller SCEEMAS programme which has had a very disappointing take-up, will be developed jointly with the Government Offices in the Regions and with local businesses and business support agencies at a cost of some £2m p.a.

Businesses value authoritative advice that takes account of local needs and the EEBPP will also look at ways of working with Government Offices and local providers of advice to establish a more coherent programme of local support, providing small businesses with access to a greater range of local specialist advice services. The existing EEBPP energy helpline is to be improved to help small businesses access the information on energy efficiency they need. This will include the introduction of a new freephone helpline.

The new arrangements will help bring energy efficiency advice on to the same footing as that delivered through the successful helpline and consultancy advice service run via the joint DTI/DETR Environmental Technology Best Practice Programme. When a small business wants to go green, it is important that the Government are there to help. This is part of our continuing efforts to rationalise the Government's support to businesses on energy and environmental performance via the Government Offices of the Regions and other organisations such as the Energy Saving Trust, Business Links, Training Enterprise Councils and local authorities, in providing a more effective support.

For this reason we are going to phase out SCEEMAS grants as from 31 August 1998, which will be the deadline for all first time applications, and to terminate the scheme at the end of January 1999, the deadline for all claims. The resources from SCEEMAS will be diverted to contribute to the development of a coordinated network of energy efficiency advice underpinned by the EEBPP and designed to be complementary with other local providers.

Further details of the developments to the Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme, including the pilot phase of the new service to SMEs, are to be announced separately.

Empty Government Homes

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how his Department, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence performed against last year's targets for reducing empty Government homes; and what new targets have been set for 1998–99. [52611]

Mr. Raynsford: Details of achievement against targets for 1997–98, and new targets for 1998–99 are listed.

I am disappointed to have to report that, despite considerable effort on the part of my Department, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office, the overall number of empty homes held by the Government has shown a small rise between 1 April 1997 and 1 April 1998. This does, however, mask a 19 per cent. fall in the number of empty homes held by the Home Office and the success of the Ministry of Defence in exceeding its target over the period. Both my Department and the Ministry of Defence have faced difficulties in responding to need with uncertainties over the Strategic Defence Review and the ongoing review of road schemes. In the case of the Highways Agency up to 50 per cent. of its vacant properties were in the process of being sold when the figures were collected.

We are concerned by the number of properties that remain vacant—we simply cannot afford to have substantial numbers of Government-owned homes lying empty and we will be working closely with colleagues to ensure that the targets set for the next year are met. These targets for 1 April 1999 all represent a significant improvement over last year's achievements and reflect realistic opportunities for reducing the numbers of vacant properties.

Departments continue to liaise with the Empty Homes Agency and other interested parties to investigate ways of bringing properties back into productive housing use and I hope next year's figures will reflect our continued efforts to improve the Government's own record.

Table to show annual targets for 1998–99 and performance figures for 1997–98 for the disposal of Government empty homes

	Home Office	*Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions*	*Ministry of Defence*
Total stock at 1 April 1998	3,189	2,473	64,238
Total empty stock at 1 April 1997	268	690	13,142
Total empty stock at 1 April 1998	217	692	13,225
Target for % empty at 1 April 1998	Less than 5	Less than 18%	To dispose of 1,000 empty homes
Achievement against target	6.8%	28%	1,562
Target for % empty at 1 April 1999	Less than 5	Less than 18%	To dispose of 1,200 empty homes
Target for % habitable homes empty more than 6 months at 1 April 1998	Less than 1	Less than 9	—
Achievement against target	1.2% (37)	10.5% (262)	—

Table to show annual targets for 1998–99 and performance figures for 1997–98 for the disposal of Government empty homes

	Home Office	*Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions*	*Ministry of Defence*
Target for % habitable homes empty for more than 6 months at a April 1999	Less than 1	Less than 7%	—
Action being taken to dispose of homes empty more than 6 months	26 Prison Quarters properties retained on security grounds and for chaplains; 5 on the market; 2 have serious repair problems; 1 now available following police operation; 1 adjoins an operational police office; 1 is to be offered to a housing association for short-term let; and 1 is in need of renovation.	203 properties either in process of being marketed for sales or sales agreed and proceeding towards completion; 3 due for auction, 7 sales deferred to assess development potential; and 49 being let through managing agents.	—

Note:
Properties that are "habitable" include all properties except:
a) derelict properties that await demolition (eg to make way for road schemes)
b) those that are expected to be demolished in the near future where the expenditure required to make them habitable would be disproportionate to their expected life (eg where substantial investment would be required to connect essential services such as water, sewage or electricity)
c) those that cannot be made accessible (eg due to adjacent construction works)

Fishing Vessel Accidents

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the consultation paper on fishing vessel accidents and the recovery of those lost at sea; and if he will make a statement. [52419]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am publishing the Consultation Paper today. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House and it will be distributed widely to representatives in the fishing industry, and to others who have written to Ministers on this subject. The consultation period will extend to 31 October and the Government will announce the results by the end of the year.

Ordnance Survey

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review was for the Ordnance Survey. [52367]

Mr. Raynsford: The resources that have been made available to Ordnance Survey for the three year Comprehensive Spending Review period are as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1999–2000	23
2000–2001	19
2001–2002	18

These resources reflect this Government's recognition that a significant part of Ordnance Survey's work is vital to the national interest, rather than simply commercial in nature. To this end, a National Interest in Mapping Service Level Agreement (NIMSA) is being negotiated between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, as customer, and Ordnance Survey, as supplier. It is intended that the agreement will commence on 1 April 1999. NIMSA will comprise a set of explicit targets and Ordnance Survey's performance against these will be monitored annually.

In addition to resources for NIMSA, resources are also available for other investment required by Ordnance Survey.

Special Waste Regulations

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) of 2 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *601–02*, how many responses have been received to the consultation exercise for amending the Special Waste Regulations 1996 and Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994. [52282]

Angela Eagle: My Department received 53 direct responses. The Scottish Office received a further 30 responses and the Welsh Office two. I am depositing a list of those who responded in the Libraries of both Houses. Copies of the letters will be placed in the relevant Departmental Library. I will issue a response once a full analysis has been undertaken.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Mike Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the Government's proposals for the payment of board members of the new regional development agencies. [52281]

Mr. Caborn: As we stated in our White Paper "Building Partnerships for Prosperity" we propose that all Regional Development Agency board members be paid. The Regional Development Agencies Bill currently before Parliament provides for remuneration of board members to be determined by the Secretary of State. Subject to Parliamentary approval of this provision, we propose to pay the chair of each Agency a notional full time rate of £100,000 per year—this would amount to £44,000 for two days per week. We propose to pay the deputy chair a notional full time rate of £70,000—this would amount to £14,000 for one day per week. Other board members will be paid at the rate of £7,000 per year for two days per month. These payments are in line with those made to members of similar Non Departmental Public Bodies.

Speed Trap Detectors

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to prevent the advertising for sale of equipment designed (i) to warn of speed traps and (ii) to adjust odometers. [51183]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. The Advertising Standards Authority and the Independent Television Commission are responsible for preserving advertising standards. My noble Friend the Minister for Roads has referred objectionable advertisements to the ASA and has been successful in having them withdrawn.

Grants and Awards (Wakefield)

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the grants and awards that require bids from applicants which his Department is responsible for administering and awarding *(a)* nationally and *(b)* that people and groups within Wakefield Metropolitan District are eligible to bid for; if he will publish the deadlines for these applications; and if he will produce this list on a regular basis. [51274]

Angela Eagle: The principal programme currently administered by my Department which requires bids from applicants in the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). The announcement on the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) explained that there would be new rounds of the SRB. Partnerships in England will be eligible to bid, including those in the Wakefield Metropolitan District. An announcement on future bidding arrangements, and hence the deadline for applications, will be made shortly.

In addition, the announcement on the outcome of the CSR, 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–94, referred to the New Deal for Communities which will offer intensive help to the most deprived neighbourhoods, focusing on enhancing economic and employment opportunities, improving the quality of life and offering better neighbourhood management. The detailed arrangements for the New Deal for Communities have yet to be announced.

Details of any bidding rounds for grants would be published at the appropriate time.

Railway Targets

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the rail routes on which the achievement of target journey times deteriorated substantially between 1993 and 1998. [51372]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The table shows the percentage of scheduled trains arriving on time comparing the annual average performance for 1992–93 with the annual average performance in 1997–98, where information is available. For 12 route groups average performance in 1997–98 was worse than in 1992–93; for 35 route groups it was better. 18 route groups have changed or been created since the end of 1992–93 and therefore no comparison can be made.

A train is deemed on time if it arrives within a specified period of the scheduled arrival time. In respect of the former InterCity and long distance Regional services this is 9 minutes 59 seconds; in respect of the former Network SouthEast and short distance Regional services this is 4 minute 59 seconds; and in respect of Scottish sleeper services this is 30 minutes. Prior to April 1995 on time was defined as within 10 minutes 59 seconds of the scheduled arrival time for the former InterCity and long distance Regional Services, and within 5 minutes and 59 seconds of scheduled arrival time for the former Network SouthEast and short distance Regional services. Certain services may be excluded from the calculations.

Moving annual average performance

TOC	*Charter service group*	*P13 1992–93 %*	*P13 1997–98 %*	*Variance positive/ (negative) %*
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	East Suffolk	—	95.2	n/a
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Felixstowe	—	87.7	n/a
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Great Yarmouth	—	97.8	n/a
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Intercity Anglia	85.0	95.6	10.8
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Lowestoft	—	97.8	n/a
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Peterborough/Cambridge	—	95.4	n/a
Anglia Railway (UK) Ltd.	Sheringham	—	97.3	n/a
Great Eastern Railways Ltd.	Great Eastern	92.6	95.0	2.4
LTS Rail Ltd.	London Tilbury & Southend	90.4	93.1	2.7
West Anglia and Great Northern Railways Ltd.	Great Northern	92.1	92.1	(0.0)
West Anglia and Great Northern Railways Ltd.	West Anglia	—	96.4	n/a
Cardiff Railway Co. Ltd.	Cardiff Valleys	90.9	90.3	(0.8)
Great Western Trains Ltd.	Great Western	86.7	78.8	(7.9)
Wales & West	Cornwall	96.9	85.2	(1.7)
Wales & West	Devon	87.8	94.7	6.9
Wales & West	South Cotswolds	90.6	93.0	2.4
Wales & West	West & Central Wales	94.4	94.4	(0.0)
Wales & West	Western Express	89.9	92.0	2.1
Wales & West	Avon	86.8	84.1	(2.7)
Thames Trains Ltd.	Thames	—	86.1	n/a
GNE Railways Ltd.	East Coast	88.0	92.0	4.0
Northern Spirit	Northern Long	93.9	97.2	3.3
Northern Spirit	South Yorks & Humberside Long	89.4	95.8	6.4
Northern Spirit	South Yorks & Humberside Short	87.8	94.6	6.8
Northern Spirit	Transpennine	91.1	93.0	1.9
Northern Spirit	West Yorkshire Long	93.7	92.1	(1.6)

Moving annual average performance

TOC	*Charter service group*	*P13 1992–93 %*	*P13 1997–98 %*	*Variance positive/ (negative) %*
Northern Spirit	West Yorkshire Short	92.8	95.6	2.8
Central Trains Ltd.	East Midlands & Lincs	90.0	97.0	7.0
Central Trains Ltd.	Inter Urban	79.8	93.0	13.2
Central Trains Ltd.	Mid Wales & Marches	88.8	94.9	6.1
Cross Country Trains Ltd.	Cross Country	81.3	86.8	5.5
InterCity West Coast Ltd.	West Coast	82.5	83.4	0.9
Midland Main Line Ltd.	Midland Mainline	88.6	92.1	3.5
Silverlink Train Services Ltd.	North London Orbital	90.0	94.3	4.3
Silverlink Train Services Ltd.	Northampton Lines	90.7	93.7	3.0
Silverlink Train Services Ltd.	Watford Locals	95.6	93.9	(1.7)
The Chiltern Railway Co. Ltd.	Chiltern	93.5	86.8	6.9
Merseyrail Electrics Ltd.	Northern Lines	—	93.7	n/a
Merseyrail Electrics Ltd.	Wirral Lines	—	96.5	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Long Distance	—	95.8	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Manchester North	—	91.6	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Lancs & Cumbria	—	95.1	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Manchester South	—	94.1	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Inter-Urban North West Express	—	91.1	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Merseyrail City Lines	—	97.2	n/a
North Western Trains Ltd.	Inter-Urban North Wales	91.7	95.1	3.4
North Western Trains Ltd.	North Wales Rural	92.8	91.7	(1.1)
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	ScotRail Central	93.5	97.2	3.7
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	ScotRail East	92.3	96.6	4.3
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	Scotrail Express	92.9	98.3	5.4
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	Scotrail Highland	89.8	97.6	7.8
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	Scotrail South-West	95.9	96.6	0.7
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	Sleepers	—	91.5	n/a
Scotrail Railways Ltd.	Strathclyde PTE	94.1	97.0	2.9
Connex South Central Ltd.	South London Lines	88.6	93.9	5.4
Connex South Central Ltd.	Sussex Coast	86.3	90.2	3.9
Connex South East Ltd.	Kent Coast	78.0	90.9	12.9
Connex South East Ltd.	Kent Link	86.2	87.0	1.8
Gatwick Express Ltd.	Gatwick Express	90.7	95.1	4.4
South West Trains Ltd.	SWT Main Line	87.4	89.0	1.6
South West Trains Ltd.	SWT Suburban	91.3	92.2	0.9
Thameslink Rail Ltd.	Thameslink	87.1	91.2	4.1
	Isle of Wight	—	97.2	n/a
Total n/a				18
Total Better				35
Total Worse				12
Total				65

Note:
The table shows moving annual average performance. The moving annual average is the average of performance for the specified 28-day period and the 21 preceding periods. The moving annual average at period 13 in any year effectively represents average performance for the year (ending 31 March)

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the reports on MEL's traffic modelling for the Birmingham Northern Relief Road prepared by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* advisers to his Department following the report by Transport Planning Associates on the three Birmingham Northern Relief Road bids and preceding the signing of the concession agreement for the Birmingham Northern Relief Road; and if he will indicate who undertook them. [51512]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No. I do not have access to papers prepared for the previous Administration. Substantial evidence on traffic was, however, put before the Public Inquiry and the Inspector's Report on the evidence put before him was fully considered before the decision was reached to approve the proposed scheme.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional market research was carried out by MEL into the potential use of the Birmingham Northern Relief Road following the report by Transport Planning Associates on the three Birmingham Northern Relief Road bids and preceding the signing of the concession agreement for the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [51513]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Any such market research is a matter for MEL, which bears the full revenue risk on this project.

Airports

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to *(a)* review the environmental impact of airports and *(b)* assess the need for further legislation to control the impact of aircraft noise on residential areas; and if he will make a statement. [51390]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The environmental impact of airports is kept under review. We have considered the need for further legislation on the control of aircraft noise and we announced in the White Paper on integrated transport policy our intention to consult on this issue.

A40

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road traffic related *(a)* accidents, *(b)* fatalities and *(c)* injuries have been reported on the A40 trunk road between Gloucester and Shipton Solers in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [51387]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Accidents and casualties on the A40 trunk road between Gloucester and Shipton Solers: 1988–97

Year	Accidents	Fatalities	Injuries
1988	110	3	132
1989	114	1	140
1990	75	0	98
1991	66	2	81
1992	76	1	94
1993	79	2	91
1994	77	4	106
1995	75	0	108
1996	57	1	79
1997	84	3	102

Bridleways

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reinstate bridleways severed by motorway construction and road improvement works; and if he will make a statement. [51382]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has powers, conferred on him by the Highways Act 1980, to stop up or divert bridleways affected by highway works. The power to stop up bridleways is not used unless the Secretary of State is satisfied that another reasonably convenient route is available or is to be provided. Reinstatement of any particular bridleway will depend on the circumstances.

Planning Applications

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many planning applications have been called in during each of the last 10 years and how many to date in 1998. [51409]

Mr. Raynsford: The number of planning applications in England called in during each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	Number
1988–89	117
1989–90	103
1990–91	132
1991–92	140
1992–93	101
1993–94	99
1994–95	167
1995–96	144
1996–97	139
1997–98	147

Each of the years listed is a financial year 1 April to 31 March. A further 41 applications have been called in between 1 April and 30 June 1998.

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by total site area the amount of development within the Thames planning area which has been granted permission since February 1997, indicating those developments which *(a)* did not and *(b)* did follow the Strategic Planning Guidance. [51730]

Mr. Caborn: Comprehensive information on planning permissions granted by local planning authorities is not held centrally. Whether an individual development accords with the principles and policies set out in Strategic Planning Guidance for the River Thames is in some respects likely in any case to be a matter of interpretation and degree.

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his powers and the circumstances in which they are involved with regard to local planning authorities which fail to follow the Strategic Planning Guidance for the River Thames when reaching decisions on planning applications within the Thames planning area. [51729]

Mr. Caborn: The Secretary of State has the power to "call in" planning applications for his own decision. The circumstances in which he would do so are as set out in the answer which I gave my hon. Friend on 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *469–68*. The Secretary of State also has the power to direct the alteration or replacement of all or part of a local planning authority's Unitary Development Plan or the modification of proposals, including where these are inconsistent with Government policy or guidance. The planning authority must determine any application in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Voluntary Organisations

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by council in England the percentage of each budget allocated to voluntary organisations in each financial year since 1992–93. [51287]

Ms Armstrong: This information is not collected centrally.

Driving Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average cost of a driving test per applicant at *(a)* Crosby, *(b)* Norris Green, *(c)* Southport, *(d)* Garston and *(e)* St. Helens test centres. [51545]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Based on the throughput of tests in the first three months of 1998, the estimated local staff and property cost per test centre is as follows:

£

Test centre	*Average cost*
Crosby	29.84
Norris Green	19.00
Southport	14.26
Garston	28.65
St. Helens	20.75

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the maximum number of tests which could be carried out per month with existing staff at *(a)* Crosby, *(b)* Norris Green, *(c)* Southport, *(d)* Garston and *(e)* St. Helens driving test centres. [51549]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information is as follows:

Test centre	*Maximum number of tests*
Crosby	1,680
Norris Green	1,680
Southport	1,120
Garston	1,680
St. Helens	1,120

The figure for Crosby is assessed on the number of staff at the test centre before it was closed in April 1998.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many driving tests were conducted at the *(a)* Crosby, *(b)* Norris Green, *(c)* Southport, *(d)* Garston and *(e)* St. Helens driving centres during (i) January, (ii) February, (iii) March, (iv) April, (v) May and (vi) June. [51547]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information is as follows:

	January to March	*April to May*
Crosby	915	0
Norris Green	1,594	822
Southport	805	694
Garston	970	1,040
St. Helens	836	606

The statistics requested have not been collated by monthly total. Figures including July 1998 are not yet available.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the individual revenue costs including salaries, building costs, leasing costs and any other expenditures in excess of £1,000 per annum of running *(a)* Crosby, *(b)* Norris Green, *(c)* Southport, *(d)* Garston and *(e)* St. Helens driving standards test centres in the last year for which figures are available. [51548]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The local staff and property costs of providing driving tests in 1997–98 at each of the centres listed were as follows:

£

Test Centre	*Revenue Cost*
Crosby	109,249
Norris Green	121,069
Southport	45,872
Garston	111,053
St. Helens	69,491

Housing

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for monitoring the provision of affordable housing to be provided under the terms set out in Circular 6/98. [51731]

Mr. Caborn: In revising Planning Policy Guidance note 3: Housing we are considering the need for monitoring the provision of affordable housing provided through Circular 6/98. We will shortly be consulting on the draft guidance later this year.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who will be responsible for finding a replacement to complete the second phase of the CTRL in the event that Railtrack decides not to exercise its option to complete it. [51526]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the terms of the revised agreement, London and Continental Railways (LCR) will retain the obligation to complete the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) if Railtrack does not exercise its option to commit to the second phase of construction. However, Railtrack has publicly stated that it fully intends exercising its option and there is a strong financial incentive for it to do so.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what aspects of the CTRL restructuring remain to be negotiated; and if he will make a statement. [51738]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since the statement of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 367–70, much work has been done by the principal parties involved in the restructuring of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) deal to document the details of the new arrangements. Although there is much to do, the work is on course to enable London and Continental Railways (LCR) to begin construction of the link later this year.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if construction of the Thames Link 2000 St. Pancras Box is dependent on finalisation of plans for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. [51739]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The two projects are physically integrated, which is why the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) promoter is contractually committed to construct the Thameslink Box. The Department is discussing the full implications of the CTRL agreement outlined by my right hon. Friend on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*,

columns 367–70, with London and Continental Railways, the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF) and Railtrack.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the scope of the powers of the regulator for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. [51527]

Ms Glenda Jackson: S16 of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996 excludes the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) as a "licensed activity" under the Railways Act 1993 and it is therefore not subject to the jurisdiction of the Rail Regulator. The rights and obligations of the parties are regulated principally through the Development Agreement between HM Government and London and Continental Railways (LCR), together with a suite of further agreements between HMG, LCR and Railtrack.

East-west Rail Link

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the conclusions of the current assessment of the East-West Rail Link. [51736]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that this refers to Railtrack's study of the Crossrail project. I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) on 7 May 1998, *Official Report*, columns *439–40*.

Parking Fines (London)

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what data his Department collates in respect of levels of unpaid parking fines in London boroughs. [51529]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. The Transport Committee for London, which co-ordinates the local authority parking regime, collects statistics on enforcement, including tickets issued, those cancelled and those paid, at a London wide level.

Two-wheeled Vehicles

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that the Journey Times Survey 1998, inner and outer London, includes sample journeys by powered two wheelers. [51813]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In 1993 the Department initiated the Journey Times Survey as a means of assessing long-term changes in accessibility in London, and how complete door-to-door journey times vary between modes. Motorcycling is not included in the survey as it is considered that the journey times recorded would not be a sufficiently reliable indicator of changing traffic conditions.

NHS Trusts (Wales)

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the NHS trusts in Wales which *(a)* have been prosecuted under health and safety legislation and *(b)* have received prohibition or improvement notes since 1991; [51594]

(2) if he will list the NHS trusts in Wales which have been found since 1991 to be in breach of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974; and if he will give details of the breaches. [51595]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* Between 1 April 1991 and 31 March 1998, Mid Glamorgan Area Health Authority was prosecuted by HSE on 28 November 1991 for a breach of the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 5 and 8. South Glamorgan Area Health Authority was prosecuted on 28 February 1996 for a breach of section 3 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. No other prosecutions have been taken in Wales.

Improvement Notices have been issued against the following NHS trusts by HSE's Field Operations Division in Wales between 1 April 1996 and 31 March 1998:

Bridgend and District NHS Trust
Carmarthen and District NHS Trust
Glan Hafren NHS Trust
Morriston Hospital NHS Trust
South East Wales NHS Ambulance Trust
Wrexham Maelor Hospital NHS Trust
Cardiff Community Health Care NHS Trust
Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS Trust
East Glamorgan NHS Trust
Clwydian Community Health NHS Trust
Gwent Community Health NHS Trust
Powys Health Care NHS Trust.

A Prohibition notice has been issued against Glan Hafren NHS Trust. Prior to 1996–97, notices against the NHS cannot be identified from HSE's computer databases. HSE holds no information on the number of "breaches" which do not result in a prosecution of the issuing of an Improvement or Prohibition Notice.

Transport White Paper

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of funds raised by local authorities from proposals in the White Paper on transport will be available for reinvestment in local transport plans. [51976]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Details will be published in due course.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 3.210 of the White Paper, A New Deal for Transport, if the duty given to the Strategic Rail Authority to consider rail access to major ports will encompass Newhaven. [51947]

Angela Eagle: In principle, yes.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the rail investment proposals within the White Paper, A New Deal for Transport, will provide for the reopening of disused rail lines. [51967]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director will control additional funds vis two new schemes. The Infrastructure Investment Fund will relieve infrastructure "pinch points" on the network which could not be tackled without additional public sector financial support. The Passenger Rail Partnership is designed to encourage and

support innovative proposals at the regional and local level that develop rail use and promote modal shift. Such proposals could include new or enhanced local rail services, better facilities for passengers and re-opening of disused lines.

Details of the operation of the proposed schemes will be announced in the Autumn. Meanwhile, local authorities are encouraged to submit to the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising proposals consistent with out integrated transport policies.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the dates of the consultation process relating to the implementation of proposals set out in the White Paper on transport. [51977]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A number of further documents have been promised and we will be publishing the first of these shortly. Others will follow over the summer and through to the end of the year.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 2.36 of the Comprehensive Spending Review and to the Transport White Paper, if he will estimate what revenues will be raised from (i) charges on parking spaces and (ii) charges for road access or congestion charges, in each of the years 1998–99 to 2005–06. [51950]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Table under paragraph 2.36 of the Comprehensive Spending Review estimated, for indicative purposes, that some £1 billion in transport investment might be funded by new revenue streams by 2005–06. This assumes that local authorities and others respond positively to the new powers, subject to the necessary legislation being in place. The actual revenue raised, the yearly income profile, and the proportions that will come from road user charging and from workplace parking charges, will depend upon the level and speed of take-up. We shall be consulting in due course on the detail of how schemes will be implemented.

Hare Hunting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will seek to amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to introduce a statutory closed season on hare hunting. [51972]

Angela Eagle: An objective under the brown hare biodiversity species action plan is to review the use of legislation pertaining to shooting and selling of hares in the light of research findings on the seasonality of reproduction. Any decision on restrictions on hare hunting will not be made until the outcome of that review is known.

Transport Policies and Programmes

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department has provided or will provide for local authority Transport Policies and Programme bids in each of the years from 1997–98 to 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [51952]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information for past allocation is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	746
1998–99	583

My Department has provisional plans to allocate the following amounts under the TPP system, or its successor, in the next three financial years:

Year	*£ million*
1999–2000	598
2000–01	695
2001–02	987

The figure for 1997–98 includes £50 million for Croydon Tramlink. Provision for that project in subsequent years is accounted for outside the TPP system.

The figures for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 are guidelines. Final allocations for each of these years will be decided following the assessment of local authorities' bids. Unlike the figures for earlier years those for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 do not include supplementary credit approvals (SCA) set aside to match ERDF grant, or the receipts that we allow local authorities to use as part of their TPP allocations.

Figures for those elements in past years were:

Year	*ERDF SCA*	*Receipts*
1997–98	35	39
1998–99	26	33

The amount to be allowed for each of these elements in future years has yet to be decided.

Expenditure plans have not yet been formulated beyond 2001–02.

Motorcycling

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* motorcycle drivers and *(b)* pillion passengers have been killed in road accidents in England and Wales in each of the last three years. [51245]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the table.

TWMV[1] Fatalities: England and Wales: 1995–1997

	Riders	*Passengers*
England		
1995	363	23
1996	371	21
1997	410	27
Wales		
1995	24	2
1996	17	2
1997	33	2

[1] Two Wheeled Motor Vehicle

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the issues raised at the special consultative meeting of motorcyclists at his Department on 25 November 1997. [52018]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The consultative meeting with representatives of motorcycle, environment and safety groups discussed all the transport aspects of motorcycling.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of commuter motorcycling as an aid to reducing pollution and congestion in urban areas. [52020]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The environmental and congestion implications of motorcycles are not clear cut. Much depends on the size of the motorcycle; whether the journeys are in addition to or a substitute for journeys previously made; and whether they substitute for journeys previously made by car, on foot, by bicycle or on public transport.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to establish a Motorcycle Strategy Group to consider the role of motorcycling within an integrated transport policy. [52038]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The White Paper 'A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone' (Cm 3950) announced that we would be setting up an advisory group to bring together motorcycle interests and other interested parties, to allow discussion of issues of concern to those who ride motorcycles and of the ways we can work together on policies, including encouraging further improvements in the safety and environmental impact of motorcycling.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the recent trends in accident deaths among motorcyclists aged over 25 years in rural areas. [52019]

Ms Glenda Jackson: 318 riders and passengers of two wheeled motor vehicles died on non built-up roads in 1998—20 per cent. more than in 1996. Deaths increased in all age groups 25 years and over except those aged 45–49 and 55–59. This increase is most disturbing and Departmental officials will be considering, with representatives of the motorcycle rider groups and industry, how these deaths and injuries can best be avoided.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of motorcycle accidents in urban areas are caused by other road users; and if he will assess ways of modifying the car driving test to take into account motorcycle awareness. [52025]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Information on the causation of injury road accidents is not yet collected on a national basis. We have introduced more questions in the driving theory test to increase awareness of vulnerable road users, including motorcyclists. We are also considering what improvements, if any, need to be made to the practical car driving test.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make representations to the Corporation of London to introduce loading bays specifically for the use of motorcycle couriers in the City of London. [52022]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No. This is a matter for the City Corporation. We have issued Traffic Management and Parking Guidance for London which makes it clear that we expect the London authorities to consider the need for motorcyclists in developing their traffic management strategies.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the consultation document on amending the requirement for learner motorcyclists to face a one year ban if they fail to pass their motorcycle riding test within two years of receiving their provisional licence. [52021]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We shall be publishing a Consultation Paper shortly.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the North Yorkshire Police Bikesafe 2000 scheme. [51973]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has not made a formal assessment of the North Yorkshire Bikesafe 2000 scheme.

Rivers Drone and Rother

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the water quality in the rivers Drone and Rother; and if he will make a statement. [51847]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency is responsible for monitoring water quality. The General Quality Assessment (GQA) scheme classifies stretches of rivers into six classes of chemical water quality, from A (very good) to F (bad), based on biochemical oxygen demand and concentrations of dissolved oxygen and ammonia.

The Agency advises that the River Rother is classified as class C (fairly good) from its source, near Clay Cross, until Danesmoor, where it falls to class E (poor). The river improves to class D (fair) downstream of Wingerworth and further improves to class C just downstream of the River Hipper. It then fluctuates between classes C and D until Woodhouse Mill sewage works in Sheffield, where it becomes class E until it meets the River Don on Rotherham.

The River Drone is too small to be classified under the GQA scheme until it flows through Dronfield. It is then classified as class E for 4.2 km until its confluence with the Rother.

Education Expenditure

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of the increases in education spending will be financed by *(a)* revenue support grant, *(b)* business rates, *(c)* council taxes and *(d)* reductions in other services for each of the next three years; and what estimate he has made of

the average cumulative increase in council tax over each of the next three years to pay for education spending increases. [51599]

Ms Armstrong: Local authority spending is financed partly through Aggregate External Finance (AEF), which includes both redistributed non-domestic rates and revenue support grant, and partly through locally raised revenue, including council taxes. It is not possible to separate the financing of education from that of other services. We have provided for an average increase of 4.9 per cent. per year in Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) overall. If local authorities increase their overall expenditure in line with the increases in SSA totals, council taxes would go up by 4.5 per cent. each year.

Departmental Environmental Policies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to discourage car use by his Department's employees. [51824]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Measures to reduce the environmental impact of transport activities will be included in the Green Transport Plans being prepared for each of the Department's key buildings. The Plans will be completed by end March 1999 and will be tailored to each location and its operational needs.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what activities his Green Minister has undertaken relating to his environmental responsibilities since being appointed. [51828]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As Green Minister for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions I have attended all three meetings of Green Ministers; held a discussion with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment (in his role as Chair of Green Ministers) to review activity on greening Government with DETR; spoken at one of the regional seminars to launch *Opportunities for Change*, the Government's consultation on a new sustainable development strategy; issued guidance on Green Transport Plans to Green Ministers in all Departments; issued the Government's *Policy Guidance on Environmental Appraisal* to DETR staff; and held discussions with key DETR staff to consider systems for environmental appraisal and consider the Department's strategy for greening its operations.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of his Department's waste is recycled at present; and what targets he has set for the future. [51826]

Angela Eagle: My Department is conducting a survey of its property managers to find out the percentage of waste recycled in 1997–98 and to agree a target to increase that percentage in future years.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the current energy consumption is of his Department; what targets have been set to reduce this level; and what plans there are for including energy efficiency performance figures in his Department's annual report. [51825]

Angela Eagle: The latest available energy consumption figures available are for 1996–97. The energy consumption of the then constituent parts of DETR totalled 144,758,340 kWh. My department is working towards achieving government targets described in the Model Policy Statement for Greening Government Operations, and publishing its achievements in its annual report.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what efforts he has made to raise awareness of environmental and sustainable issues within his Department; and if specific training will be made available to staff where appropriate. [51827]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government consultation paper, *Opportunities for Change*, was put on the Department's internal "intranet"; copies of the accompanying leaflet were circulated to all staff and publicised in the Department's in-house magazine *Grassroutes*. The Government Offices for the Regions (GORs) organised a programme of regional events, and are now working on the revised strategy. *Policy Guidance on environmental appraisal* was distributed widely within the Department, its Agencies, NDPBs and GORs in April and placed on the DETR intranet. We are planning further initiatives to foster staff awareness, building on the on-the-job training for staff who work on environmental policy issues, *Work of the Department* induction courses for staff and internal seminars for staff on the outcome of Kyoto and sustainable development strategy consultation.

Road Maintenance

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department will provide or has provided to local authorities for road maintenance in each of the years from 1997–98 to 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [51949]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The majority of the funding for the routine maintenance of local authority roads is provided through one element of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG): the Highways Maintenance Standard Spending Assessment (HMSSA). Additional funding for the structural maintenance of principal roads (local authority "A" Roads) is provided by the TPP system. Figures given in the table are for all English local authorities.

Funding of local road maintenance

£ million

Year	*HMSSA*	*TPP*	*Total*
1997–98	1,759	92	1,851
1998–99	1,767	80	1,847
1999–2000	1,813	100	1,913
2000–01	1,859	130	1,989
2001–02	1,905	180	2,085

The TPP figures—and therefore the totals—for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 are guidelines. Final allocations for each of these years will be decided following the assessment of local authorities' bids. Expenditure plans have not yet been formulated beyond 2001–02.

Figures for spending by local authorities on local road maintenance in 1994–95 to 1996–97 were given in an answer on 16 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *243*, to Named Day Question 50885 asked by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

Red Routes

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will widen the exemption on red route loading bays to allow the delivery and collection of goods by motorcycle couriers and other light delivery vehicles. [52023]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Loading bays on the red route network are available to any vehicle carrying out legitimate loading or unloading. This is subject only to the signed limits on time and duration.

Virgin Rail Services

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received about the performance of Virgin rail services on *(a)* the West Coast Mainline and *(b)* cross country routes; and if he will make a statement. [51907]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department and the Franchising Director's Office have received 72 representations on all aspects of Virgin West Coast performance and 43 representations on Virgin Cross Country performance since the beginning of this year. Virgin Train's performance has been affected recently due to problems with rolling stock and infrastructure on West Coast, and problems with rolling stock on Cross Country. Virgin Trains have taken action to bring about improvements. We look to the Franchising Director to work with Virgin to ensure that improvements are sustained. In his statement on transport policy on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 784–88, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced our plans to set up a Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) with stronger powers to enforce the delivery of contractual obligations by train operators. We also expect the SRA to specify more demanding performance standards for new or renegotiated franchises.

Road Safety

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on road safety in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* the West Midlands Region. [51905]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Road safety is a high priority in the West Midlands Region as it is at national level. The Transport White Paper published on 20 July makes it clear that as part of the New Deal for transport we will set a new road safety target for Great Britain for 2010, together with a strategy and programme of measures for achieving it. It is, however, for Staffordshire County Council and the other local authorities in the region to promote and implement, with partners, schemes to improve road safety on roads in their area.

As part of the local safety schemes allocation in the 1998–99 Local Transport Settlement we allocated £0.378 million to Staffordshire County Council and £5.123 million to the West Midlands Region.

Workplace Parking Charges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 4.107 of the White Paper, A New Deal for Transport, if Westminster City Council will be empowered to levy charges for workplace parking within the Parliamentary Estate. [51953]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government stated in the White Paper that they proposed to legislate to enable the parking charge to apply to all types of workplace parking, wherever situated. We shall issue a consultation document in due course that will discuss, among other things, the institutional arrangements for London.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish draft legislation relating to the creation of a strategic rail authority. [51945]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We shall bring the necessary legislation before Parliament at an early opportunity.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Drug Abuse

Mr. Clappison: To ask the President of the Council how much is to be spent in 1998–99 on prevention and treatment services for drug abuse; and how much is planned to be spent on these services in each of the next three years. [51117]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Figures for 1998–99 could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The figures available, as collected for the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, relate to 1997–98. In that year, expenditure on drugs prevention and education is estimated to have totalled £50 million. This included central Departments' funding and a proportion of teacher time spent on drugs education in the classroom. Funding for treatment interventions, relating primarily to health and social services projects, and anti-drugs initiatives in the Prison Service, is estimated to have amounted to £103 million. In the same year, expenditure on international supply reduction, including HM Customs and Excise, is estimated to have amounted to £153 million; and on proactive drugs enforcement, £77 million.

On 14 July, we announced that extra resources, amounting to £188 million in total up to 2001–02, will be made available to fund proactive work to tackle drug misuse under the anti-drugs strategy. Details of the breakdown of this expenditure will be announced in due course.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list for *(a)* his Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and

(B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49237]

Mr. Fatchett: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has 1,256 official vehicles, including dedicated flag cars used by Heads of Post, as well as pool cars, mini buses, trucks and motor cycles. These are divided between 45 based in the United Kingdom, and 1,211 in use at British Diplomatic Posts overseas. The total figure includes 26 leased vehicles, all of which are operating overseas, but it is intended to increase the number of leased vehicles where this represents better value for public funds.

Details of the fuel types and engine cubic capacities for the 45 vehicles based in the United Kingdom are as follows:

34 Diesel			*11 Petrol*
Engine size	*Quantity*	*Engine size*	*Quantity*
1.5	1	1.8	5
1.7	7	2.0	3
1.8	2	2.3	1
2.0	1	2.5	2
2.3	1	—	—
2.5	16	—	—
2.9	1	—	—
3.0	1	—	—
4.5	1	—	—
10.0	1	—	—
12.0	2	—	—

Detailed information about the fuel types and engine cubic capacities of all the official vehicles held overseas is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The following are the number of vehicles expected to fall due for replacement:

1998–1999: 194

1999–2000: 263

2000–2001: 168.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50682]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Few staff are solely employed to handle correspondence and for most staff this is part of their normal duties.

EU Council

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for August and the major European Union events for the next six months. [52364]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The information is as follows:

European Calendar: August 1998-January 1999

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date ofissue.

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
August 1998	There are no Councils scheduled for this month	
September 1998		
3	Brussels	Political Committee
5–6	Salzburg	Foreign Ministers (informal)
7–8	Brussels	Special Committee on Agriculture
10–12	Linz	Culture (informal)
14–18	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
15–16	Bregenz	Transport (informal)
21	New York	Political Committee
19–22	St. Wolfgang, Austria	Agriculture (informal)
24	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs
24	Brussels	Internal Market
25–27	Brussels	ECOFIN (informal)
28–29	Brussels	Agriculture Council
October 1998		
1–2	Luxembourg	Transport Council
2–3	Luxembourg	Industry/Research and Technology (informal)
5	Luxembourg	Labour and Social Affairs Council
5	Luxembourg	Political Committee
5–6	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
5–9	Strasbourg	European Parliamentary Plenary
6	Luxembourg	Environment Council
12	Luxembourg	ECOFIN Council
13	Luxembourg	Research Council
13	Brussels	Political Committee
19–20	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
19–23	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
22	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council

Date	Venue	Event
23–24	Baden-bei-Wien	Education (informal)
24–25	Innsbruck (t.b.c.)	Meeting of Heads of State/Government (informal)
26	Luxembourg	Political Committee
26–27	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
28–29	Luxembourg	Transport Council
29–30	Vienna	Justice and Home Affairs (informal)
November		
4–5	Brussels	European Parliamentary Plenary
9	Brussels	Political Committee
9	Brussels	Internal Market Council
9–10	Brussels	General Affairs Council
12	Brussels	Health Council
16	Brussels	Industry Council
16–20	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
17	Brussels	Culture Council
20	Brussels	Budget Council
20	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council
23	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
23–24	Brussels	Agriculture Council
25	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
26	Brussels	Youth Council
26	Brussels	Political Committee
30	Brussels	Development Council
30–1 December	Brussels	Transport Council
December		
1	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
1–2	Brussels	Labour and Social Affairs Council
2–3	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
3–4	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs
4	Brussels	Education Council
7	Brussels	Political Committee
7–8	Brussels	Environment Council
7–8	Brussels	General Affairs Council
10	Brussels	Research Council
11	Vienna	Political Committee
11–12	Vienna	European Council
14–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
14–18	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
15	Brussels	Energy Council
17–18	Brussels	Fisheries Council
January 1999		
1	Brussels	ECOFIN
14	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
18	Brussels	Agriculture Council
18	Brussels	ECOFIN
19	Brussels	Agriculture Council
25–26	Brussels	General Affairs Council

Special Operations Executive

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to release more records of the wartime Special Operations Executive. [52365]

Mr. Robin Cook: The records of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) have been released progressively since 1993. The next batch of records, covering Western Europe, have been transferred to the Public Record Office, and will be opened today. Further SOE records will be released in due course.

Angola

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures Her Majesty's Government have taken to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1173 (1998) which imposed further sanctions on UNITA as from 1 July. [52366]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Resolution 1173 imposed a freeze on the funds and financial resources of UNITA, its officials and their immediate families; a ban on most official contacts in Angola with UNITA; a prohibition on the import of diamonds outside the governmental certificate of origin regime; and prohibitions on the sale or supply of equipment which may be used in mining or transportation, and on transportation services.

We have instructed all our diplomatic missions overseas to avoid any contact with UNITA, whether locally or in Angola.

The prohibition on the importation of diamonds will be given effect in the United Kingdom by amendment to the Open General Import Licence.

The remainder of the prohibitions are to be implemented in the UK by the Angola (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1998 and in the Overseas Territories by the Angola (United Nations Sanctions) (Dependent Territories) Order 1998 made on 21 July and laid yesterday.

Similar Orders have been made to give effect to the Resolution in the Crown Dependencies. These orders restrict the sale or supply of certain goods which may be used in mining or transportation and the supply of transportation services; impose a freeze on the funds and financial resources in relation to UNITA and persons connected with UNITA, and, for the Overseas Territories and Channel Islands, restrict the importation of diamonds exported from Angola on or after 1 July 1998. There is provision for medical and humanitarian exceptions.

East Timor

Dr. Moonie: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place a copy of the report by the European Union Troika mission on East Timor in the Library. [52541]

Mr. Fatchett: The Conclusions of the EU Heads of Mission Troika visit to East Timor (27–30 June) have now been published. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Human Rights Fund

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria he is using in making allocations of funding from the Human Rights Fund. [49740]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* Priority is given to projects which contribute to the following themes:

children's rights, including commercial sexual exploitation;

media, including training;

rule of law co-operation, including training and prison reform;

support for the development of civil society;

country specific projects outside the scope of the above but which contribute to the human rights strategy of missions and FCO Geographical Commands.

Additional priority is given to projects in any of these areas which promote the advancement of women and equality of opportunity for men and women.

Algeria

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the examination of the Algerian Government's report on civil and political rights which will be considered by the United Nations Human Rights Committee on 20 and 21 July in Geneva. [51845]

Mr. Fatchett: The Algerian Government's second periodic report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has now been examined by the Human Rights Committee in Geneva. We welcome this example of Algeria's co-operation with UN human rights mechanisms. We note the concerns expressed by the Committee and hope that Algeria will act upon the Committee's recommendations concerning the full protection and promotion of all human rights in Algeria, including the right to life.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the mandate of the United Nations Secretary General's six person special mission to Algeria. [51843]

Mr. Fatchett: The mandate of the special mission is the responsibility of the United Nations. We welcomed the UN Secretary-General's 7 July announcement of the forthcoming visit to Algeria, under UN auspices, by a panel of eminent persons. We look forward to hearing the mission's findings.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the findings of the United Nations Secretary General's special mission to Algeria will be published by the United Nations. [51844]

Mr. Fatchett: The forthcoming visit of a special mission to Algeria is taking place under UN auspices. We are not aware of the United Nations' intentions about publication of the mission's report.

Iran

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he intends to upgrade diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran; and what plans there are for ministerial visits to Iran. [51992]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no immediate plans to upgrade the level of our diplomatic relations with Iran or for a ministerial visit to Tehran.

Gibraltar

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the policy of Her Majesty's Government towards *(a)* integration and *(b)* free association of Gibraltar with the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [51966]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In the context of the recent review of the Overseas Territories, we have re-examined these options. We have concluded that neither integration nor free association with the UK offer appropriate options for modern Overseas Territories. That includes Gibraltar.

Vienna Summit

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he is planning to put forward for the Vienna Summit; and if these will include the idea of a second Chamber for the European Parliament. [51993]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No decision has yet been taken about what proposals the Government may make to either the Vienna European Council or the meeting of Heads of State or Government on 24/25 October.

Counter-drug Agreement

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the counter-drug agreement between the US and the UK signed in Washington on 13 July. [51881]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A copy of the Agreement by the UK and US concerning maritime and aerial operations to suppress illicit trafficking by sea in waters of the Caribbean and Bermuda, signed in Washington on 13 July, will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

It will be published as a Command Paper in the Miscellaneous Series, accompanied by an Explanatory Memorandum, and will be subject to the Ponsonby Rule.

Alois Brunner

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *397*, if he will now make representations to the Syrian Government in support of the French Government's application to extradite Alois Brunner on war crime charges. [51946]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no evidence of the whereabouts of Alois Brunner, or if he is still alive. We have no plans to make representations to the Syrian Government about this matter.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who authorised, and for what purpose, Britain's High Commissioner to Sierra Leone to accompany the Kabbah Government into exile following the military coup. [51877]

Mr. Robin Cook: Following the military coup, like the rest of the international community, the United Kingdom continued to regard President Kabbah as the head of the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone. We were in the lead in efforts to achieve the peaceful restoration of that Government.

Although the junta was in power in Freetown, large parts of Sierra Leone were under the control of forces loyal to President Kabbah, and it was widely expected that the junta would not remain in power. It was important to remain in close contact with the President and to maintain the High Commissioner's strong relationship with him. Ministers therefore agreed that the High Commissioner should, on a temporary basis, stay in Conakry, where he had been evacuated after the coup in Freetown.

Legg Inquiry

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish the report of the Legg Inquiry. [52007]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have not yet received the report of the investigation by Sir Thomas Legg and Sir Robin Ibbs. I will publish it as soon as possible after receiving it.

UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what official representations the British Government have made to the Government of Somalia regarding that Government's non-ratification of the UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child; and on what dates; [52032]

(2) what official representations the British Government have made to the Government of the United States of America regarding that Government's non-ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and on what dates. [52026]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The United Kingdom has regularly played a leading part in securing the adoption of United Nations resolutions calling upon States to accede to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a matter of priority. At the 1998 session of the Commission on Human Rights the UK, on behalf of the European Union, reiterated this call. We have made no direct representations to the United States, which signed the Convention in 1995. Nor have we made representations to Somalia where, as a result of Civil war, there has been no government or recognised national authority since 1991.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Salmonella (Eggs)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his letter 114760 of 26 June 1998, when he expects the ACMSF to report on factors which determine the presence of salmonella contamination in or on eggs. [50645]

Mr. Rooker: It is hoped that the ACMSF Working Group will be able to begin its work shortly. No timetable is being imposed on the Group for completing its work. The ACMSF will report as quickly as possible, commensurate with the need to tackle the question thoroughly and subject to the constraints imposed by the Committee's wider work programme.

Coastal Fishing Limits

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 22 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *424*, on coastal fishing, which of the definitions referred to is applied to UK coastal fisheries limits. [51551]

Mr. Morley: There is no single definition of UK coastal fisheries limits. All of the definitions contained in my answer of 22 June 1998 are relevant.

Fisheries Limits

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the definition of the word "region" in the context of fisheries limits. [51552]

Mr. Morley: The word "region" is open to varying definitions. The appropriate one in any given case will depend on the precise circumstances in which the word is used.

Woodlands

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what acreage of new woodlands has been planted in England and Wales in each of the last five years. [51557]

Mr. Morley: The information requested by my hon. Friend is given in the table. All areas are in hectares.

Year ended 31 March	*Area planted in England*	*Area planted in Wales*
1994	6,357	636
1995	5,375	566
1996	4,708	442
1997	4,654	411
1998	4,369	498

Meat Imports

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce a requirement for *(a)* pork and *(b)* bacon sold in the United Kingdom to be provided on a basis that meets British welfare regulations to ensure that United Kingdom animal welfare measures are not circumvented by import of meat from stall and tether units in Europe. [50699]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* Single market rules do not allow the banning of imports of pork, bacon or other animal products on the ground that they have been produced to lower welfare standards than apply in the United Kingdom.

We have made clear our intention to work to raise EU minimum welfare requirements for pigs. That is why we have urged the Commission to follow up the report published last year by its own Scientific Veterinary Committee and bring forward early proposals to improve the standards laid down in EU law.

I also consider it important for retailers, wherever practical, to reassure their customers by applying high welfare standards to their purchases regardless of origin, as I understand some already do.

Research

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the effect that the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review will have on the future funding of public-good research into the horticulturally related areas of *(a)* GMOs, *(b)* reduction in pesticides usage and *(c)* food quality; [51457]

(2) pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review of the amount of money spent on agriculture and horticulture research by his Ministry with outside bodies, if it will remain unchanged in real terms. [51486]

Dr. John Cunningham: Precise budget allocations to individual MAFF programmes have not yet been finalised. The Ministry's expenditure plans for the years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 will be announced as soon as possible.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received in support of an EU-wide ban on the export of live horses for slaughter. [51379]

Mr. Morley: The Government have received representations from welfare organisations, and from a number of individuals, advocating a ban on the export of live horses from the EU for slaughter in third countries.

Fishing Industry (EU Assistance)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the current EU assistance projects to the fishing industry, indicating the amount spent on each by country in the last year for which figures are available. [51465]

Mr. Morley: Aid is available to Member States from the EU Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) under Objectives 1 and 5a for investment in the following areas (not all applied in the UK):

- the permanent cessation of fishing activities, including decommissioning;
- the re-orientation of fishing activities (joint ventures/enterprises with third countries);
- vessel construction and modernisation;
- aquaculture;
- enclosed marine areas (e.g. artificial reefs);
- fishing port facilities;
- processing and marketing;
- promotion;
- early retirement; and
- compensation for cessation of fishing.

Aid is also available under PESCA to assist the restructuring and diversification of the fisheries sector in fisheries dependent areas and to help it deal with problems such as overcapacity and market weakness.

Member States' plans for total expenditure in their FIFG Sectoral Plans and PESCA Programmes in the five-year period 1994–1999 are:

Country	*FIFG objectives 1 and 5a (Mecu)*	*PESCA (Mecu at 1996 prices)*
Austria	2.00	—
Belgium	24.87	2.94
Denmark	139.90	23.03
Finland	27.00	3.91
France	228.10	39.05
Germany	158.00	23.47
Greece	130.00	34.33
Ireland	47.00	8.86
Italy	367.40	40.13
Luxembourg	1.10	—
Netherlands	55.10	14.96
Portugal	213.20	32.44
Spain	1,114.60	49.53
Sweden	44.10	4.55
United Kingdom	123.62	49.49

No figures are currently available on actual annual expenditure in other Member States, but EU expenditure in the UK in the latest available years was:

FIFG Objectives 1 and 5a (1997–98): £17.4m

PESCA (1997): £0.92m.

In addition, fisheries expenditure on grants to UK ports under the European Regional Development Fund in 1997–98 was £0.09m.

Cumberland Rum Butter

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he is making regarding the impact of EU Commission Regulations 623/98 on the manufacture of Cumberland rum butter. [51455]

Mr. Rooker: Rum butters with a minimum milk fat content of 34 per cent. are unaffected by the Commission Regulations. The Ministry's officials are currently working with manufacturers of "ambient" brandy and rum butters in order to minimise any disruption to their business arising from this unnecessary Regulation. In particular, assistance and advice are being given in the preparation of an application, on behalf of a number of companies, for a derogation permitting traditional ambient alcoholic butters, including "Cumberland rum butter", to continue to be so described. The Government will be submitting this application to the European Commission under the provisions of article 4(1) of Commission Regulation 577/97.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 24 July 1998

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Attorney-General if he will make a statement about the ethical principles which apply to solicitors who are employed by the Crown Prosecution Service as Crown prosecutors. [52712]

The Attorney-General: After consultation with the Director of Public Prosecutions, I have today published a Statement of Ethical Principles, which applies to all solicitors who are employed by the Crown Prosecution Service as Crown Prosecutors. The Statement is made in accordance with paragraph 1(h)(v) of the Law Society's Employed Solicitor Code 1990. It meets the Law Society's requirement under the Code that such a statement should be published before solicitors employed by the Crown Prosecution Service can exercise their rights of audience in the higher courts.

The Statement sets out:

1. the inter-relationship between Crown Prosecutors' obligations as civil servants and as members of the legal profession;
2. the position of Crown Prosecutors as prosecutors and Crown Prosecution Service employees; and
3. the position of Crown Prosecutor solicitors who exercise rights of audience in the higher courts.

I am placing a copy of the Statement in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Spending Review

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what conclusions he has reached as a result of his Department's Spending Review; and if he will make a statement. [52422]

Mr. Chris Smith: The outcome of our Spending Review has been a recognition of the importance of all my Department's activities, economically, culturally and socially, for the quality of people's lives. I have secured an extra £290 million over the next three years, an investment which will bring obligations and responsibilities. We will have a new contract with all our funded bodies which will demand improvements in efficiency, access and quality in return for investment in support of our new objectives. To help ensure that this happens, I will establish a tough new team to monitor and improve standards throughout all our sectors.

I have placed in the Library of the House copies of a consultation paper which I am issuing today, proposing a number of changes in the sectoral landscape for which my Department is responsible. This will create a more efficient structure for delivering public money in pursuit of clear objectives. I will make a further announcement in the Autumn on the outcome of the consultation.

WALES

Education Action Zones

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the education action zones designated for Wales. [51619]

Mr. Hain: There are no designated Education Zones in Wales at present. Under Clause 10 of the School Standards and Framework Bill provisions relating to Education Action Zones (EAZs) do not apply in Wales, though the Secretary of State may introduce them at a later date. In the Education White Paper for Wales, *Building Excellent Schools Together*, published in July last year, the Welsh Office pledged to consult widely before introducing EAZs. Any final decision on the introduction of EAZs in Wales is likely to be a matter for the National Assembly and will be informed by the outcome of any consultation exercise and the experience of EAZs in England.

Urban Task Force

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to ensure that his Department receives advice from the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers. [51815]

Mr. Hain: The Urban Task Force has a remit to identify causes of urban decline in England. Welsh Office officials are being informed of its progress by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and will receive a copy of the completed report in due course.

Transport Plans

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to publish his plans for the future of transport in Wales. [52819]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Transport Policy Statement "Transporting Wales into the Future" has been published today. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Graduates

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the number of university graduates who attended Welsh secondary schools who are pursuing their careers outside Wales. [51448]

Mr. Hain: Information in the form requested is not available. However, information on the first destination of Welsh-domiciled students in 1995–96 indicates that 2,768 graduates were known to have taken up employment outside Wales.

Pensioners

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the percentage of people over 65 years

of age resident in Wales who were not economically active in Wales, in the last year for which figures are available. [51449]

Mr. Hain: In Spring 1998, 96 per cent. of people over 65 years of age who were resident in Wales were not economically active in Wales, according to the Labour Force Survey.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of written parliamentary questions tabled for answer by the Welsh Office on a named day under S.O. No. 22 (4) have been answered substantively on the named day since 1 May 1997. [51450]

Mr. Ron Davies: From 1 May 1997 to 24 July 1998, 89 per cent. of written parliamentary questions tabled to my Department for answer on a named day were answered substantively.

Gross Domestic Product, Powys

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the most recent GDP figures for Powys. [51452]

Mr. Hain: The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has not previously published GDP figures for Powys. However, I understand that GDP figures for various areas in Wales, including Powys, will be issued this summer.

Policy Announcements

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many policy initiatives announced by his Department since 1 May were announced *(a)* by means of a statement to the House prior to a press conference and *(b)* by a press conference. [51451]

Mr. Ron Davies: I have made no statements to the House on major policy initiatives since 1 May. I have held a number of press conferences on a variety of subjects since that date.

Economic Indicator Data

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what economic indicator data the Welsh Office collects for each unitary authority in Wales. [51453]

Mr. Hain: Economic indicator data for Wales are mainly collected by Government Departments other than the Welsh Office. Rates of claimant unemployment, economic activity, and employment are published for all unitary authority areas. Unemployment rates from the Labour Force Survey are currently published for six authorities, and average gross weekly earnings of full-time employees for 15 authorities: for these indicators the estimates for other authority areas are subject to excessive sampling variation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Official Secrets Act

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to make ministers in the proposed Northern Ireland Assembly subject to the Official Secrets Act 1989 on taking office; and if she will make a statement about the security implications of Ministers from paramilitary-connected parties taking Government office. [42164]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 18 May 1998]:* Paragraph 5 (3) of Schedule 13 of the Northern Ireland Bill, which is currently before Parliament, makes provision for the Official Secrets Act 1989 to apply to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland and to Northern Ireland Ministers.

We are considering whether any further provisions are necessary to protect national security interests in the context of devolution.

New Deal

Mr. Moss: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people are participating in the New Deal in Northern Ireland. [51022]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. Malcolm Moss, dated 22 July 1998:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me as Chief Executive of the Training & Employment Agency to reply to your question about the number of people participating in the Government's New Deal in Northern Ireland.

By Friday 17 July, a total of 2,724 18–24 year old clients had entered New Deal Gateway in Northern Ireland. They will progress to the most appropriate of the four options available to them. In addition some 826 employers have signed employer agreements.

The Chancellor's recent initiative means that additional funding is now available to extend New Deal provision for the 25+ age group from November of this year. Plans are also advanced to implement the New Deals for Lone Parents and Disabled people later this year.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Beef Exports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to which countries Northern Ireland beef is currently exported. [51556]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Since the lifting of the beef export ban on 1 June 1998 the only consignment of Northern Ireland beef to be exported went to Belgium.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Open Government

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on open Government with reference to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies, *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies and *(d)* corporate organisations within his Department's control; and what steps he plans to take to encourage the provision of information by such bodies. [51483]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department, together with its Executive Agencies and its executive-NDPBs which come under the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, are subject to the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ordnance Survey, the Office of the Passenger Rail Franchising, the Office of the Rail Regulator and the Office of Water Services also come within the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Commissioner and are subject to the Code.

Those quasi-NDPBs, public corporations and nationalised industries which do not come within the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Commissioner have their own arrangements on open government but are encouraged by the Department to follow the spirit of the Code.

The Department, and other bodies under its control with public responsibilities, also have a statutory duty to provide information on the environment under the Environmental Information Regulations 1992.

The Department, its Agencies, NDPBs, public corporations and nationalised industries are considering how to prepare for the requirements of the Freedom of Information legislation.

Eurostar

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what was the cost of the seven regional Eurostar sets; what is their current location; and what proposals are being considered for their future use; [51741]

(2) what assessment the consortiums bidding to run Eurostar have provided to his Department of the viability of running regional Eurostar rail services. [51655]

Ms Glenda Jackson: These trainsets were purchased as part of a larger procurement contract which included the intercapital sets so it is not possible to give actual costs. However, they are currently being leased at £22 million each. The trains are based at North Pole Depot in North London and at Eurostar's Longsight facility in Manchester and they are currently undergoing tests on the UK and continental rail networks.

The provision of regional Eurostar services are a matter for London and Continental Railways. The consortium chosen by LCR to operate Eurostar have been asked to review urgently the feasibility of regional Eurostar services, and to report to the Government before the end of the year. This report has not been received yet.

Clinical Waste

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the Environment Agency has recently relaxed its code governing the treatment of clinical waste derived from hospitals. [51647]

Angela Eagle: Clinical waste is defined in Regulation 1(2) of the Controlled Waste Regulations 1992 and, as controlled waste, must be managed and disposed of in accordance with sections 33 and 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Some types of clinical waste are also classified as "Special Waste" and subject to the additional controls in the Special Waste Regulations 1996. The Environment Agency are responsible for the administration and regulation of the waste management licensing system, which is designed to ensure that waste is handled in a way which does not harm human health or pollute the environment.

The Environment Agency has not relaxed its current codes governing the treatment of clinical waste. The Agency is, however, carrying out research into the risks associated with clinical waste. The Agency will be taking the emerging results into account in its review of guidance on the handling and management of clinical waste which is being conducted jointly with the Health and Safety Executive. Any changes in recommended practice will be the subject of consultation with interested parties.

Huddersfield Canal

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department will provide assistance to ensure the completion of the Huddersfield Canal Project. [51537]

Angela Eagle: The Huddersfield Canal Company—a partnership of three local authorities—is seeking support from English Partnerships and the Millennium Commission in completing the restoration of a significant stretch of the Huddersfield-Rochdale Canal. The Huddersfield Narrow Canal Millennium Project is a large and very complex scheme requiring a significant level of investment from public funds. Regular discussions are taking place between English Partnerships and the Huddersfield Canal Company.

English Partnerships are currently carrying out a full economic appraisal to ensure the project aims and costs are reasonable and; the proposal robust; and that they represent good value for money.

Rail Companies (Complaints)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement concerning recent increases in the number of complaints made to rail companies. [51875]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *466*. Since that answer, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced in his statement on transport policy on 20 July, our plans to set up a Strategic Rail Authority with stronger powers to enforce the delivery of contractual obligations by train operators. We also expect the SRA to specify more demanding performance standards for new or any renegotiated franchises.

Mesothelioma

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have received compensation for mesothelioma in each of the last 10 years; and what was the total amount of compensation received. [51900]

Angela Eagle: The table provides details of the number of claimants paid under the Pneumoconiosis Etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979 in each of the last 10 years. A complete breakdown of which claims were

paid for mesothelioma is not available. However, virtually all claims received by DETR today under the 1979 Act are for asbestos-related diseases. An analysis of claimants in 1996–97 revealed that over 70 per cent. of all claims received were from sufferers of mesothelioma. The Department does not hold figures for civil claims.

Pneumoconiosis Etc. (Workers Compensation) Act 1979: Statistics

Year	Number of sufferers paid	Number of dependants paid	Total number of payments	Total amount (£)
1988–89	25	30	55	499,098
1989–90	52	53	105	712,184
1990–91	74	73	147	1,380,260
1991–92	94	55	149	1,434,072
1992–93	93	69	162	1,954,086
1993–94	126	76	202	2,271,666
1994–95	185	122	307	3,474,975
1995–96	236	127	363	4,149,087
1996–97	301	152	453	5,463,060
1997–98	283	108	391	4,962,659

Chemicals in the Environment

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to carry out the review of policy on chemicals in the environment announced by the Deputy Prime Minister last year. [52544]

Mr. Meacher: I will be launching the first stage of the review process, a consultation paper on "Sustainable Production and Use of Chemicals", on Monday 27 July 1998. Copies of the consultation paper will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also in the Vote Office. This consultation paper is part of the Government's family of consultation papers on sustainable development.

The consultation paper seeks views on how the mechanisms for identifying and acting on potentially damaging chemicals in the environment can be improved.

The views received during the consultation period will feed into the development of a White Paper on the sustainable production and use of chemicals to be published early next year.

Local Authority Housing

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the number of households in local authority properties who are under-occupying because their household size and structure does not justify the number of bed-spaces provided. [52127]

Mr. Raynsford: The table shows estimates from the Survey of English Housing of the number of local authority households in England in which the number of bedrooms available exceeds the bedroom standard (i.e. the requirement under a longstanding standard for bedrooms, implied by the composition of the household). In certain cases a household may need a spare bedroom, for caring or another purpose, and any assessment of whether a property is under-occupied should take such factors into account.

Local authority households in England, 1996–97: Difference from bedroom standard

	Thousands of household	Percentage
At or below bedroom standard	1,901	55
One bedroom more than the standard	1,114	32
Two or more bedrooms more than the standard	466	13
All households with more bedrooms than the standard	1,580	45
All households	3,481	100

Notes:
Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local housing authorities operate incentive schemes to encourage under-occupying tenants to move to smaller properties; and how many people have moved in each of the last three years via such schemes. [52126]

Mr. Raynsford: Information about local authorities' management policies, including under-occupation strategies, was formally collected for the first time on the 1996 Housing Investment Programme questionnaire. At that time, of 357 local housing authorities, more than 230—almost two thirds—indicated that they offered direct incentives to their under-occupying tenants to encourage moves into smaller social rented accommodation.

Between 110,000 and 114,000 council tenants have transferred to other properties owned by their local authorities in each of the last three years; around one quarter (26–27,000) have moved into homes with fewer bedrooms, although it is not known how many of these were as a result of incentives offered by the authority.

Road Tax

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the annual cost of collecting road tax on cars; and what estimate he has made of the cost of collecting the tax through a levy on petrol. [52072]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In 1997–98, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency spent £127 million on vehicle licensing and registration, of which some £60 million is attributable to licensing. This figure relates to the collection of vehicle excise duty (VED) on all vehicles—a figure relating solely to cars is not available.

While it would be possible to estimate the cost of collecting revenue equivalent to VED through fuel duty, this has not been carried out because much of the cost of VED collection would continue to be incurred, to maintain the vehicle register. The current system also serves other functions, such as the checking of MoT certification and insurance.

Water Quality

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he

will take to ensure that adequate investment is made by water companies to meet European Union water quality targets by 2000. [52073]

Angela Eagle: Investment by water companies to meet water quality targets implied by European legislation up to the year 2000 was agreed in the 1994 Periodic Review of water company price limits. OFWAT and the Environment Agency, as the water industry regulators, are monitoring progress and have instituted procedures to ensure that companies meet the statutory deadlines.

Tachographs

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has made to *(a)* the EC Commission and *(b)* his counterparts in each other EU Member state, about compliance and enforcement of legislation relating to tachographs; and if he will make a statement; [52129]

(2) what representations he has received concerning the compliance of other EU member states with legislation relating to tachographs. [52130]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have neither made nor received any representations about the enforcement of the drivers' hours regulations in other European Union Member States.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of tachographs were inspected by his Department in the latest year for which figures are available: what was the equivalent figure in each other EU member state; and if he will make a statement. [52128]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Council Directive 88/599/EEC requires Member States to check a minimum of 1 per cent. of days worked by drivers falling witnin the scope of the EU drivers' hours rules under Regulation 3820/85. All Member States are required to submit a biennial return on the implementation of the Regulation to the European Commission which, in turn, produces a report based on the information received. The last European Commission report covered the years 1993 and 1994. Explanatory Memorandum No. 5051/98 advised Parliament on the content of that report.

In 1997–98 the Vehicle Inspectorate checked a total of 1,770,271 charts, which exceeds the UK target. Comparable figures from other Member States are not yet available.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the treatment of four-by-four vehicles pulling trailers carrying goods in connection with a trade or business and with a gross vehicle weight of 3.5 tonnes or more is regulated under legislation on tachographs in the same way in each EU member state; and if he will make a statement. [52131]

Ms Glenda Jackson: European Union (EU) Regulation 3820/85, which applies to vehicles used for the carriage of goods where the maximum permissible weight of the vehicle, including any trailer, exceeds 3.5 tonnes, is directly applicable in all EU Member States. In the UK it is necessary to augment the directly applicable legislation by including in domestic legislation details of infringements and penalties that can be incurred on conviction for a drivers' hours or tachograph related offence.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received regarding the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [51912]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Our decision in July last year, that the Birmingham Northern Relief Road should proceed, concluded a lengthy statutory process. That process involved a 15-month public inquiry which provided a statutory forum for a wide range of representations. Our decision was reached after considering the Inspector's report that recommended in favour of the scheme. Although the orders for the scheme have been made we have continued to receive various representations from interested parties, including MPs and members of the public, on subjects related to the scheme—most notably the effects on the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals.

Marine Pollution

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect of polychlorinated biphenyls on the marine environment in the Irish Sea. [52193]

Angela Eagle: The relevant Government departments and Agencies in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and in the Republic of Ireland are jointly taking the lead in the production of a Regional Quality Status Report on the Celtic Seas, including the Irish Sea. Organic contaminants, including polychlorinated biphenyls, form part of this assessment. The final report, which is one of five regional reports on which the Quality Status Report of the North East Atlantic, which is being prepared by the Ospar Commission, will be based is due for publication by the year 2000.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the annual emissions of radioactive liquid discharges from Sellafield of *(a)* tritium, *(b)* carbon 14, *(c)* zinc-65, *(d)* strontium 89, *(e)* strontium 90, *(f)* technetium 99, *(g)* iodine 129, *(h)* europium 152, *(i)* europium 154, *(j)* total Beta and *(k)* uranium in each of the past 20 years. [52195]

Angela Eagle: Discharges from Sellafield via the Marine Pipeline, in tetrabecquerels (TBq), were as follows:

Year	*H-3*	*C-14*	*Zn-65*	*Sr-89*	*Sr-90*	*Tc-99*
1978	1050	NR	0.027	7.2	600	179
1979	1200	NR	0.022	7.5	250	43
1980	1300	NR	0.033	12	352	57
1981	2000	NR	0.034	10.9	277	5.8
1982	1745	NR	0.04	12.5	319	3.6
1983	1831	NR	0.04	8.5	204	4.4
1984	1586	0.7	0.03	3	72	4.3
1985	1100	1.3	0.06	1.8	52	1.9
1986	2150	2.57	0.04	0.2	18	6.6
1987	1375	2.11	0.02	0.2	15	3.65
1988	1724	3	0.09	0.21	10	4.16
1989	2144	2.03	0.13	0.37	9.2	6.07

Year	H-3	C-14	Zn-65	Sr-89	Sr-90	Tc-99
1990	1699	1.97	0.12	0.3	4.2	3.82
1991	1800	2.44	0.12	0.18	4.1	3.86
1992	1200	0.804	0.08	0.14	4.2	3.18
1993	2310	2.03	0.1	0.22	17.1	6.06
1994	1680	8.16	0.11	0.33	28.9	72
1995	2670	12.4	0.17	0.38	27.7	192
1996	3009	10.6	0.12	0.29	16	155
1997	2560	4.4	0.03	0.33	37.4	84

Less than

Year	I-129	Eu-152	Eu-154	Total Beta	Uranium (Kg)
1978	0.074	7.3	27.9	7124	10936
1979	0.12	3.7	1.9	4100	6000
1980	0.14	4.7	2	4306	4861
1981	0.19	3.5	1.6	3831	4499
1982	0.1	0.56	1	3528	6011
1983	0.2	'0.2	'0.5	2490	2602
1984	0.1	'0.2	0.3	1190	2037
1985	0.1	'0.1	0.1	587	2447
1986	0.12	'0.1	0.1	418.21	1902
1987	0.1	0.19	0.11	89.31	1404
1988	0.13	0.08	0.08	81.26	970
1989	0.17	0.09	0.1	101.04	1212
1990	0.11	0.08	0.05	70.93	853
1991	0.159	0.07	0.05	62.2	860
1992	0.068	0.04	0.04	57.2	630
1993	0.161	'0.05	0.04	97	650
1994	0.157	0.22	0.11	126	1388
1995	0.253	0.18	0.14	188	1345
1996	0.412	0.14	0.08	143	1158
1997	0.519	0.12	0.16	138	759

' Less than

Source:

Environment Agency

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the quantities of *(a)* synthetic chemicals, *(b)* mercury, *(c)* cadmuim, *(d)* lead, *(e)* zinc, *(f)* nickel and *(g)* arsenic released into the Irish Sea from establishments in the United Kingdom in each of the past 10 years; and if he will make a statement on the proposed reduction targets for each. [52194]

Angela Eagle: The 3rd North Sea Conference in 1990 committed North Sea states to monitor substances listed in Annexe 1A of the Ministerial Declaration of the Third International Conference on the Protection of the North Sea. Monitoring has been carried out since 1991 at selected sites (rivers and direct discharges to the sea) and the UK's results have been reported to Ospar on this basis as annual load estimates for the whole of the UK. The reduction targets for Annexe 1A listed substances were agreed by North Sea Ministers in 1990 and were set at 50 per cent. between 1985–1995. The UK has a good record in achieving this target.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect of tributyl tin from the hulls of ships on the marine environment in the Irish Sea. [52192]

Angela Eagle: The relevant Government Departments and Agencies in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and in the Republic of Ireland are jointly taking the lead in the production of a Regional Quality Status Report on the Celtic Seas, including the Irish Sea. The Marine and Land Based Inputs to Sea Research Programme of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has recently received the final report of a research contract into the effects of tributyl tin in western coastal waters. This report, which is available from the Department's library, will form part of the overall Celtic Seas assessment, one of the five regional assessments on which the Quality Status Report of the North East Atlantic, being prepared by the Ospar Commission, will be based. The Ospar report is due for publication by the year 2000.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the releases of *(a)* synthetic chemicals, *(b)* mercury, *(c)* cadmium, *(d)* lead, *(e)* zinc, *(f)* nickel and *(g)* arsenic into the marine environment by each EU country in each of the last 10 years. [52191]

Angela Eagle: Data are not available in the form requested. However, the UK has reported on inputs of 35 of the 36 substances listed in Annexe 1A of the Ministerial Declaration of the Third International Conference on the Protection of the North Sea, The Hague, 8 March 1990 for the period 1991–1995. The Annexe 1A list comprises of 36 substances of priority concern in the marine environment, including heavy metals and synthetic chemicals.

Right to Roam

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he proposes to introduce legislation to provide greater public access to the open countryside. [52270]

Angela Eagle: We are considering carefully all options, both statutory and voluntary, in the light of extensive consultation. We intend to announce our conclusions later this year. If we decide that a new statutory right of access is necessary, we will introduce legislative proposals as soon as practicable, taking into account competing priorities for Parliamentary time.

PRIME MINISTER

Civil Servants

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister which of his Ministers have been selected for assessment by civil servants under his new procedure; and if he will *(a)* place such assessments in the Library and *(b)* publish them. [51906]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* There is no such procedure. I have not required civil servants to make assessments of the performance of their Ministers.

Young People

Mr. Singh: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has *(a)* to appoint a Minister for youth and *(b)* to set up a youth commission. [52184]

The Prime Minister: None at this stage. The interests of young people are effectively represented across Government by Ministers and officials working closely together and in regular meetings with those bodies representing the interests of young people.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Auction Markets

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what initiatives he is taking to protect auction markets for livestock. [52120]

Mr. Rooker: Livestock Auction Markets are commercial operations. As such, the future of any livestock market is a matter for market forces and not one in which the Government would wish to intervene.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on recent trends in farmers' incomes. [52119]

Mr. Rooker: In 1997, total income from farming in the United Kingdom was estimated at £3.36 billion, a fall of 37 per cent. in real terms compared with the previous year. The figure for 1998 will not be available until December but the indications are that it will be lower than in 1997.

Hill Farming

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the age profile of *(a)* livestock and *(b)* hill farmers. [52116]

Mr. Rooker: The age profiles of holders of livestock holdings and holdings in Less Favoured Areas (LFA) for England and Wales in 1995 are given in the table.

Age	*Livestock[1] holdings % of holders[2]*	*LFA[3] holdings % of holders*
25 years[4]	0.33	0.34
25–29 years	1.28	1.47
30–34 years	4.01	4.41
35–39 years	7.18	7.14
40–44 years	9.53	9.96
45–49 years	12.64	12.15
50–54 years	14.44	14.59
55–59 years	13.55	13.77
60–65 years	13.61	13.96
65 years and over	23.42	22.22

[1] Livestock holdings are defined using EC farm types 41 to 44, 50 70 and 72, i.e. Cattle, Sheep, Pigs and Poultry.
[2] The holder is that person in whose name the holding is operated
[3] Holdings wholly or mainly in Less Favoured Areas
[4] Less than
Source:
1995 EC Structure Survey

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the future of hill farming in England. [52113]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are committed to helping to secure a sustainable future for hill farming, recognising in particular the role that farmers play in maintaining the environment and social fabric of the uplands. From 2000 the system of support will be changed more closely to reflect those social and environmental aims. These changes are being considered in the context of the Agenda 2000 Rural Development proposals for the Less Favoured Areas.

Livestock Farms

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the trends in the number of livestock farms. [52115]

Mr. Rooker: The trend in the number of livestock holdings in England and Wales is given in the table.

Number of livestock holdings[1,2]

Year	*England*	*Wales*	*Total*
1987	87,150	24,986	112,136
1988	86,359	24,774	111,133
1989	86,453	24,871	111,324
1990	82,372	24,160	106,532
1991	81,840	23,995	105,835
1992	81,379	23,814	105,193
1993	81,707	23,653	105,360
1994	81,457	23,311	104,768
1995	77,643	22,349	99,992
1996	76,430	22,135	98,565
1997	75,547	21,874	97,421

[1] Livestock holdings are defined using Main Farm Types (based on 1985 classification) 6 to 20 and 24, i.e. Specialist Pigs, Specialist Poultry, Mixed Pigs and Poultry, Dairy-LFA, Dairy-Lowland, Specialist Sheep-SDA, Specialist Beef-SDA, Mixed Cattle and Sheep-SDA, Cattle and Sheep-DA, Cattle and Sheep-Lowland, Cropping and Dairy, Cropping Cattle and Sheep, Cropping Pig and Poultry, Cropping and Mixed Livestock, Mixed Livestock and Specialist Goats
[2] Excludes minor holdings
Source:
June Agricultural Census

Farming (Young People)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what initiatives his Department has taken to attract young people to farming. [52117]

Mr. Morley: The farming industry offers a wide range of opportunities. Underpinned by MAFF and Sector Challenge funding, Lantra, the National Training Organisation for agriculture and commercial horticulture and other land-based and related industries, has a programme promoting career prospects and providing information on careers and training in farming. MAFF also provides a grant to the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs to support education and training. The industry itself has developed a Rural Starters Register. There are also various schemes for building links between schools and farming.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid Programme

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the proportion of the aid programme that is best distributed by her Department direct and the proportion best distributed by other agencies and organisations. [51652]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development (DFID) disburses the development assistance budget through a number of channels, including multilateral organisations, civil society organisations and the Commonwealth Development Corporation, in addition

to its own programmes in developing countries. As the new White Paper indicates, the primary objective of our development assistance programme—eliminating world poverty—requires building a range of partnerships for development, covering a wide range of interventions, which will vary from country to country. For example, in many countries, it will be helpful to work with the private sector to strengthen development; we are therefore building new partnerships with business.

New Deal

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many people her Department is committed to employing during 1998 under *(a)* the subsidised job option and *(b)* the unsubsidised job option of the New Deal programme. [52582]

Clare Short: We are currently examining these arrangements and have not at this stage made a formal commitment.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans her Department has to support the church movement in Sudan. [52074]

Mr. Foulkes: We are supporting Christian Aid's efforts to provide humanitarian assistance through the church movement in Sudan. We also support an emergency relief project in South Sudan implemented by the NGO Association of Christian Resource Organisations Serving Sudan (ACROSS).

Chagos Archipelago (Sharks)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of shark numbers in the Chagos Archipelago. [50021]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

Observations made during the 1996 Chagos Expedition, compared with earlier expeditions in the 1970s, suggest a significant decline in reef shark numbers. Sharks are not a target species for the licensed inshore fisheries. But unwanted by-catches do occur, which are monitored through log-book returns and an observer programme.

Indian Ocean Territories (Fishing)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to monitor fisheries in British Indian Ocean Territory, and to designate marine-protected areas. [50019]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* I have been asked to reply.

The tools used to monitor the British Indian Ocean Territory fisheries include a licensing regime, enforcement via a fisheries patrol vessel, observer programmes, ad hoc research, and assessment of log book returns. The implications of designating marine protected areas, particularly for enforcement and legislation, are being considered.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Stephen Lawrence

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has submitted evidence to the inquiry into the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence. [52869]

Mr. Straw: I am today placing in the Library a copy of the Home Office evidence that has been submitted to the inquiry into the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence. The evidence is of a factual and background nature.

The inquiry was established under section 49 of the Police Act 1996. The terms of reference of the inquiry are:

> To inquire into the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence in order particularly to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will collate and publish the number of cosmetics experiments on animals carried out in the United Kingdom each year on behalf of foreign companies. [51119]

Mr. George Howarth: This information is not readily available for this year. It may be possible to collect if from 1999.

Mr. Peter Bleach

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many clerical errors have been identified in the information sent to Calcutta in relation to the trial of Mr. Peter Bleach; and if he will make a statement. [51880]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* Following a complaint by Mr. Bleach that he had not been given proper access to the evidence forwarded to the Indian authorities by the British police, in the interests of fairness, North Yorkshire Police forwarded to him copies of all the evidence that had been passed to the Indians. This exposed a clerical error by the police, namely that there was a small discrepancy between one of the copy documents passed to the Indians and one forwarded to Mr. Bleach.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Temporary Classrooms

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact his spending plans will have as regards enabling temporary classrooms in the Colchester constituency to be replaced with permanent accommodation by July 2002. [51285]

Mr. Byers: The development of Asset Management Plans by local education authorities (LEAs) will help to identify capital funding priorities across all maintained schools. This should include an assessment of the need to replace temporary classrooms.

The Plan to be developed by Essex LEA will cover the Colchester constituency.

School Funding

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will formally extend the consultation period until 31 December for the "Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools" document. [51936]

Mr. Byers: No. An extension to 31 December would have the effect of precluding the implementation of major changes in the school funding system before April 2000.

Unemployment

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* claimants were registered and *(b)* full-time equivalent staff were employed at each job centre in the East Midlands and Eastern Region of the Employment Service at the latest available date. [51841]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Harry Barnes, dated July 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your questions concerning Jobcentre staffing and client volumes in the Employment Service East Midlands and Eastern Region. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

You requested a full list of Jobcentres in the East Midlands and Eastern Region detailing the number of full-time equivalent staff employed and jobseekers registered. The details are attached at Appendix A for your information.

Jobcentres are resourced according to labour market conditions. In particular, the East Midlands and Eastern Region contains very diverse labour markets from rural and geographically isolated ones to industrialised conurbations. Offices with a very small register size geographically serve also isolated outlying villages where it would be very difficult for clients to visit alternative Jobcentre sites in larger centres of population.

I hope this is helpful. Alan Read, Deputy Regional Director for the Employment Service, East Midlands and Eastern Region, would be happy to discuss any of the details further.

Employment Service—East Midlands and Eastern Region

Jobcentre claimants	*Number of full time equivalent ES staff employed June 1998*	*Unemployed registered June 1998*
Alfreton	26.8	1,201
Arnold	19.4	1,370
Bakewell	4.5	77
Beccles	17.0	924
Beeston	15.4	812
Belper	14.0	432
Bolsover	7.6	377
Boston	23.8	740
Bulwell	39.7	3,191
Bury St. Edmunds	22.1	868
Buxton	12.2	138
Cambridge	51.3	2,834
Chesterfield	41.7	2,807
Clay Cross	13.0	645
Coalville	17.4	893
Corby	26.1	1,061
Cromer	13.7	533
Daventry	12.5	424

Employment Service—East Midlands and Eastern Region

Jobcentre claimants	*Number of full time equivalent ES staff employed June 1998*	*Unemployed registered June 1998*
Derby Wardwick	45.3	1,730
Derby Normanton	38.1	2,643
Derby St. Peters	36.7	2,342
Dereham	17.3	708
Diss	15.2	597
Downham Market	5.0	334
Dronfield	8.0	318
Eckington	9.2	447
Ely	7.9	518
Fakenham	10.0	455
Felixstowe	12.4	512
Gainsborough	16.9	903
Grantham	20.9	954
Great Yarmouth	63.5	3,095
Haverhill	12.3	520
Heanor	22.9	942
Hinckley	18.5	811
Horncastle	8.2	252
Hucknall	16.0	771
Huntingdon	19.7	854
Hunstanton	3.8	263
Ilkeston	20.7	987
Ipswich	58.4	3,535
Kettering	23.0	1,042
Kings Lynn	30.5	1,475
Leicester Highcross Street	34.4	2,548
Leicester Charles Street	42.5	1,695
Leicester Aquis Street	39.2	2,573
Leiston	8.0	250
Lincoln High Street	29.7	1,264
Lincoln Crown House	44.0	2,629
Long Eaton	24.9	1,079
Loughborough	27.3	1,701
Louth	13.1	624
Lowestoft	39.6	2,572
Lutterworth	3.2	81
Mablethorpe	10.7	333
Mansfield Stockwell Gate	22.6	1,297
Mansfield Byron House	31.8	2,157
March	12.5	471
Market Harborough	8.4	248
Matlock	9.8	443
Melton Mowbray	10.2	364
Mildenhall	7.0	249
Netherfield	15.7	888
Newark	21.0	1,056
Newmarket	8.4	449
Northampton	66.2	3,726
North Walsham	13.0	526
Norwich Kiln House	106.2	5,971
Nottingham Castle Boulevard	59.3	4,509
Nottingham Watercourt	63.1	4,490
Oakham	4.2	110
Peterborough	63.7	3,237
Retford	16.6	914
Rushden	12.6	529
Shirebrook	9.6	449
Skegness	19.4	504
Sleaford	10.1	362
Spalding	13.4	614
Stamford	12.8	393
Staveley	14.2	719
St. Neots	10.2	544
Stowmarket	10.5	358
Sudbury	13.4	701
Sutton in Ashfield	33.1	1,914
Swadlincote	17.5	805
Swaffham	7.8	298
Thetford	11.4	548

Employment Service—East Midlands and Eastern Region

Jobcentre claimants	*Number of full time equivalent ES staff employed June 1998*	*[1]Unemployed registered June 1998*
Towcester	5.4	192
Wellingborough	24.9	1,071
Wigston	16.0	817
Wisbech	19.2	1,136
Woodbridge	11.6	352
Worksop	30.1	1,692
Wymondham	11.4	409

Source:
[1] Claimant count figures—Office for National Statistics (NOMIS)

Schools (Information Technology Access)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures his Department is taking to improve IT access for disabled children and those with learning difficulties in Gloucestershire. [52100]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department is pursuing a number of initiatives to improve IT access for all children, including those with a disability or learning difficulty. These include £11 million in the Schools Access Initiative last year to help mainstream schools become more accessible to children with disabilities. The purchase of information technology equipment was part of this initiative. In addition £100 million is being invested to enable schools to buy the latest technology and educational software to access the National Grid for Learning. The Grid will ensure that children develop the skills they need to be part of an inclusive society.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures his Department is taking to support dyslexic children in Gloucestershire in respect of *(a)* specialist training and *(b)* IT projects. [52103]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have made resources available to ensure that teachers are equipped to use new technology and are able to show all young people, including those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, how IT can help them. This is in addition to a new ICT curriculum for the initial training of all new teachers. We have also tasked the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (formerly known as the National Council for Education Technology) with supporting the Government's commitment to promote the development of relevant teaching and learning resources for ICT, with particular reference to provision for special educational needs.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what representations he has received concerning the *(a)* beneficial and *(b)* negative effects of the policy of the Employment Service not to accept vacancies which specified an upper age limit; [51638]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact of the policy of the Employment Service not to accept vacancies specifying an upper age limit. [51639]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. David Chidgey, dated July 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply direct to your questions about the effects of the Employment Service's decision not to accept vacancies from employers specifying an age limit. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Employment Service ceased to accept vacancies which include an upper age limit in late April 1998. The operation of this policy is due to be formally evaluated in the Autumn when it will have been in force for six months, the minimum period deemed appropriate to fully gauge its impact. At this stage, therefore, I am unable to provide any specific details about the beneficial or negative effects of the policy.

However, early feedback from Employment Service staff working in Jobcentres indicates that the policy has been well received by older jobseekers, who view it as a positive step in helping them to secure employment. The number and nature of the employer queries we have received so far tends to indicate that employers who use Jobcentre services are generally content with the policy and are willing to accept it. We are only aware centrally of two employers to date who have wanted to place vacancies with upper age limits, who have withdrawn their vacancies as a result of our policy. A fuller picture will emerge once the policy has bedded in and the results of the evaluation are known.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he intends to publish (i) the report on his consultations for legislation and (ii) a code of practice to cover age discrimination. [51641]

Mr. Andrew Smith: We aim to publish the report of my consultation on age discrimination in employment within the next few weeks and a draft of the Code of Good Practice for consultation in the Autumn.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he has made towards the publication of a non-statutory code of practice on age discrimination. [51640]

Mr. Andrew Smith: We have made good progress with a code of good practice and aim to publish a draft for consultation in the Autumn.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the Comprehensive Spending Review if he will publish the budget for Ofsted for the next three financial years. [52238]

Mr. Byers: Plans for Ofsted's future expenditure will be published in the Autumn.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide a breakdown of the items included within the £1 billion service development fund included in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [52252]

Dr. Howells: Within the provision announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Government are creating a Service Development Fund of £750 million in 2000–01 and £1 billion in 2001–02. The purpose of holding such a Fund within the overall spending totals is

to ensure that the right balance of funding between the existing agenda and those areas where policy is still being developed. Consequently it is not possible at this stage to give a breakdown of allocations from the Fund in those two years.

Skill Shortages (West Midlands)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to tackle skill shortages in the West Midlands. [51910]

Dr. Howells: In the last Budget, £6.544 million was allocated to the West Midlands for projects specifically aimed at addressing skills shortages through the Skills Challenge and Centres of Excellence for IT and High Technology prospectus.

Teachers' Pay

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for performance related pay for teachers. [52253]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend's goals for higher standards in schools require a modern structure for the teaching profession and one which will provide incentives for excellence and ensure that good performance both in teaching and management is recognised and rewarded.

Further details will be included in the Government's Green Paper on modernising the teaching profession which will be published before the end of the year.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans to issue a green paper on teachers' pay. [52239]

Ms Estelle Morris: A Green Paper on the teaching profession will be published for consultation before the end of the year. It will not be just about teachers' pay, but is intended to launch a wide-ranging debate about modernising the teaching profession.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

International Criminal Court

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Rome Conference on the establishment of an international criminal court. [51745]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the statement made to the House by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 803–04.

Indian Ocean Territories (Fishing)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to prevent illegal fishing in the off-shore waters of the World Heritage Site at Henderson Island. [50039]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* None. There is no capacity for monitoring fisheries in this area.

Iran

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the EU troika visit to Iran; and if he will make a statement. [52267]

Mr. Fatchett: The Tehran visit was for the first round of substantive talks of the new EU/Iran dialogue. The EU and Iran had earlier agreed that these should be comprehensive, addressing both issues of mutual interest and those of concern to both the EU and Iran. Both sides agreed that the talks were held in a positive atmosphere and that there was a frank exchange of views on all issues. We hope that this dialogue will continue and will lead to a more fruitful relationship between the EU and Iran.

NATO Expansion

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimates his Department has made of the likely costs to public expenditure in (i) Hungary, (ii) the Czech Republic and (iii) Poland of membership of NATO. [51886]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As a percentage of their GDP, defence expenditure in 1998 in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland is estimated at 1.8 per cent, 1.51 per cent. and 2.4 per cent. respectively. On joining NATO the Czech Republic has agreed to pay 0.9 per cent., Hungary 0.65 per cent. and Poland 2.48 per cent. of NATO's common funded budgets which currently amount to some one billion pounds per annum. As with existing members of NATO, the contributions of new Member States to the Alliance will be a relatively small element of their total defence budgets.

OSCE

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost for each of the past 10 years of the United Kingdom contribution to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe; and if he will make a statement on plans for future contributions. [51892]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The costs of the United Kingdom's contribution before financial year 1991–92 could be provided only at disproportionate expense. Approximate costs from 1991–92 to 1997–98 were as follows:

£

Year	*Cost*
1991–92	239,157
1992–93	747,414
1993–94	2,039,782
1994–95	2,773,800
1995–96	4,473,113
1996–97	3,912,353
1997–98	5,746,302

The total UK contribution to the OSCE in 1998–99 is likely to be around £10 million, reflecting increased OSCE operational activity in former Yugoslavia. This figure is likely to increase in the next few years as OSCE activity widens in line with the Government's conflict prevention and human rights objectives.

Sierra Leone

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers have visited Sierra Leone since 1 May 1997; and on what dates. [52273]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I visited Sierra Leone on 31 March 1998 as a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG).

No other British Ministers have visited Sierra Leone since 1 May 1997.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Vehicles

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list for *(a)* her Department and *(b)* bodies listed in the National Asset Register, how many vehicles are currently (i) owned and (ii) leased; if he will indicate their (A) fuel types and (B) engine cubic capacities; and how many vehicles are expected to fall due for replacement in each of the years (1) 1998–99, (2) 1999–2000 and (3) 2000–01. [49238]

Mr. Field *[holding answer 6 July 1998]:* The information about vehicles owned by this Department is set out in the tables.

Breakdown of fleet by fuel type and engine capacity

Engine capacity	*Diesel*	*Petrol*	*Electric*
750cc	—	7	—
900cc	—	5	—
1.0	—	76	—
1.1	—	20	—
1.2	—	19	—
1.3	—	10	—
1.4	53	100	—
1.5	97	8	—
1.6	5	85	—
1.7	1,163	3	—
1.8	343	42	—
1.9	1,204	5	—
2.0	1,191	212	—
2.1	5	—	—
2.2	4	—	—
2.5	189	—	—
2.7	3	2	—
2.8	3	—	—
3.0	2	—	—
4.0	2	—	—
4.9	1	—	—
5.9	1	—	—
6.2	1	—	—
	—	—	—

Vehicles due for replacements

Tax year	*Number of replacements*
1998–99	976
1999–2000	877
2000–01	780

Women's Refuges

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what funding her Department has provided in the current financial year for research into improving the provision and effectiveness of women's refuges. [51147]

Ms Ruddock: In order to collect accurate information on the full range of accommodation and support services for women and children escaping domestic violence, this Department, in conjunction with the Women's Unit, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Health, has commissioned a comprehensive package of research.

As part of this package, Women's Aid is undertaking a survey of refuge groups in England which will provide up to date information on refuge provision. The total cost of this element of the research, to be met in this financial year, is £49,000.

Landlord Fraud

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many prosecutions her Department has instigated relating to landlord fraud in the Greater London area in the last 12 months. [51266]

Mr. Field: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Total number of successful prosecutions for housing benefit/council tax benefit by local authorities in Great Britain and Greater London for 1996–97 and 1997–98

	Great Britain	*[2]Greater London*
1996–97	610	140
1997–98[1]	[1]630	[1]100

[1] The 1997–98 figures are provisional and are therefore subject to change when more returns are received from Local Authorities

[2] Greater London comprises the London Boroughs of Barking, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Camden, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston-Upon-Thames, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Newham, Redbridge, Richmond-Upon-Thames, Southwark, Sutton, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Wandsworth, Westminster, and City of London

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

Source:

Department of Social Security, Quarterly Administration forms.

Pensions (Expatriates)

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the up-rating of frozen pensions for British citizens living overseas. [51620]

Mr. Denham: There continue to be competing demands and constraints on Social Security spending in the UK. Therefore, we consider that it would be wrong to raise expectations that moves to unfreeze UK pensions paid abroad would be likely to attract priority in the current circumstances.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the potential saving in administration costs if the winter fuel payment were to be combined with the Christmas bonus. [51823]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* While it may appear intuitively appealing to combine the administration of Winter Fuel Payments and Christmas Bonus, there are significant difficulties in doing so. These arise because the two payments are made under different legislation, entitlement to the payments may be established in different ways, and while the Christmas Bonus is paid on an individual basis, Winter Fuel Payments are paid on a household basis to many pensioners.

Pensioners

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the number of pension advisers to be recruited by her Department and of their total cost. [51888]

Mr. Denham: Plans for taking forward our strategy to help the poorest pensioners on a national basis are currently being developed, and will be informed by the results from the pilot projects and research. Therefore, it is not possible to give an indication of the numbers of personal advisers or their total cost, at this stage.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to her oral statement of 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 703–06, what estimate she has made of the loss of council tax rebate and housing benefit for persons who receive the minimum income supplement; and if she will make a statement. [51883]

Mr. Keith Bradley: There will be no loss of Council Tax Benefit or Housing Benefit resulting from the measures announced on 17 July 1998.

From next April, Income Support rates will be increased to give the poorest pensioners a guaranteed minimum income of £75 per week for a single person. Couples, and older pensioners, will receive more. The full details are in the table.

Pensioners currently entitled to Income Support, and those who newly qualify as a result of the increases and the implementation of our national programme to find those pensioners who are entitled but who do not claim, will normally qualify, as now, for full eligible Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

New Income Support rates from April 1999

£

Age	Single pensioners now	Single pensioners from April 1999	Couples now	Couples from April 1999
60–74	70.45	75.00	109.35	116.60
75–79	72.70	77.30	112.55	119.85
80+[1]	77.55	82.25	117.90	125.30

[1] Also paid to younger pensioners with disabilities

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the current number of pensioners who *(a)* receive council tax benefit and housing beneiefit and *(b)* are eligible for them but do not claim. [51891]

Mr. Denham: The information is set out in the table.

The latest available figures for pensioners entitled to, but not receiving, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit are for 1995–96. For recipients, estimates have been provided for the same period for comparative purposes.

Number of pensioner recipients and range of entitled-non recipients for Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit

	Recipients 1995–96	Entitled-Non Recipients 1995–96
Council Tax Benefit	2,770,000	Between 950,000 and 1,420,000
Housing Benefit	1,940,000	Between 230,000 and 320,000

Sources:

1. For Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit recipients 1995–1996—The four quarterly 100 per cent. caseload counts from May 1995, August 1995, November 1995 and February 1996, and May 1995 1 per cent. caseload count

2. For those entitled to but not receiving their Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit—The 1995–1996 Family Resources Survey

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate her Department has made of the number of members of the state earnings related pension scheme in each of the last 10 years. [51887]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

Number of people who have contributed towards the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme from 1986–87 to 1995–96 for Great Britain

000s

Tax year	Number of members
1986–87	10,116
1987–88	7,483
1988–89	7,493
1989–90	7,206
1990–91	7,161
1991–92	6,471
1992–93	6,327

Number of people who have contributed towards the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme from 1986–87 to 1995–96 for Great Britain

000s

Tax year	*Number of members*
1993–94	6,555
1994–95	7,115
1995–96	7,496

Notes:

1. Figures are for Great Britain, and are rounded to the nearest thousand

2. When a person reaches State pension age the amount of entitlement to the State Additional Pension is calculated. The formula used for this calculation means there are people with contracted-out employments, an Appropriate Personal Pension (APP) or who only pay Class 2 or Class 3 National Insurance contributions (NICs) who may receive a small amount of State Additional Pension in respect of earnings during these years. The figures quoted exclude any such cases. People who are not contracted-out, who earn over the annual lower earnings limit have been categorised as members of SERPS

3. Married women who have retained the right to pay reduced rate NICs are not entitled to accrue SERPS while the reduced rate authority is retained

4. The figures show a reduction in 1987–88 mainly due to the introduction of APPs

Source:

"Second Tier Pension Provision 1995–96", (Table 4.0, Volume 2) published February 1998. The source of data for this publication is the Lifetime Labour Market Database (LLMDB), a 1 per cent. sample of the National Insurance Recording System taken at February 1997. 1995–96 is the latest tax year for which figures are available

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of *(a)* the expenditure costs of the state earnings related pension scheme per member and *(b)* the comparative costs for members of private pension schemes and occupational schemes. [51889]

Mr. Denham: Information on the administration costs of State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) per member is not available. The administration cost to the National Insurance Fund for awarding and paying State Retirement Pension, including SERPS, and collecting and maintaining records of National Insurance contributions was some £622 million in 1996–97[1].

It is difficult to draw meaningful comparisons between the costs of running SERPS, occupational pension schemes and personal pensions. Administration costs for funded pensions include the costs of fund management as well as general administration. Occupational pensions benefit from economies of scale and may be able to reduce costs by using the employer's payroll and data systems. Personal pensions on the other hand are individual arrangements, and charges will include margins for advertising, selling and profit.

A survey of occupational pensions scheme expenses recently published by the Government Actuary's Department[2] shows very wide variations in costs, ranging from 2 per cent. to 44 per cent. of scheme contributions, with an average of 8 per cent. of annual contributions from members and employers.

Charges for personal pensions are measured differently and generally presented as a percentage of the final fund including investment return. They also vary widely. The effect of charges on an individual's accrued fund will depend on factors such as the amount of contributions made and whether the policy runs to retirement or is made paid-up after only a few years. A report[3] in 1997 did, however come up with some broad conclusions. With average charges and no commission, between 15–20 per cent. of the moneys accumulated in a personal pension can be absorbed by charges. With commission, charges can rise to 20–25 per cent. of the accumulated fund. However if contributions are made for only a few years and then stop, charges can rise to absorb 40–50 per cent. of the accumulated fund.

[1] Source Department Report 1998–99, CM3913

[2] GAD Survey of Expenses of Occupational Pension Schemes, published June 1998

[3] "Pensions—A Long Term Strategy" published by the Association of British Insurers June 1997.

Disabled People

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she will announce the results of the second round of bids for the New Deal for Disabled People and the levels of funding allocated. [52237]

Mr. Denham: The New Deal for Disabled People is being funded with £195 million from the Windfall Tax. £5 million of this will be used to fund a number of Innovative Schemes which will test new ways of helping disabled people into work. The results of the first tranche of bids for Innovative Schemes was announced on 16 July and 10 schemes were successful, costing a total of £2.4 million. The closing date for second tranche bids is 9 October and we expect to announce the results in early spring 1999, depending on the volume of bids received. £2.6 million will be available for the second tranche.

We also plan to pilot a new Personal Adviser service for disabled people, initially in twelve areas. These will cover over a quarter of a million people on incapacity benefits, and will offer advice and support on an individual basis to disabled people who want to move towards work. Pilots in the first six areas, to be run by the Employment Service, will start in October. The remainder will be put out to open tender and will start running next year. £5 million has been made available to fund the pilots during 1998–99, and a further £12 million has been set aside for 1999–2000.

Housing Benefit (Scotland)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the amount of housing benefit expenditure in Scotland for 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98, broken down into *(a)* the private rented sector, *(b)* housing association sector and *(c)* the public sector. [47976]

Mr. Keith Bradley *[pursuant to his reply, 7 July 1998, c. 445]:* The information available is set out in the table.

Scottish Housing Benefit expenditure

£ million

	1995–96	*1996–97*
Private rented sector	197	199
Housing association sector	78	101
Public sector (council and new town tenants)	628	661
All housing benefit	903	961

Note:
Expenditure rounded to the nearest million
Sources:
1. 1998–99 Social Security departmental report
2. Housing Benefit management information system (HBMIS) 1 per cent. samples

SCOTLAND

Correspondence

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans his Department has to correspond electronically with *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* members of the public. [49824]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 13 July 1998]:* The Scottish Office expects to participate over the summer recess, along with a number of other Departments, in the testing of a system for replying electronically to Written Parliamentary Questions which will make use of the Government Secure Intranet (GSI). The Scottish Office has been connected to the GSI since June of this year. In addition, contact points for electronic mail are given on The Scottish Office's Internet Web site, www.scotland.gov.uk. The use of electronic mail by The Scottish Office to correspond with external organisations and members of the public who have access to electronic mail services is growing and is expected to increase further as more correspondents gain access to electronic mail services.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50691]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*. Correspondence is handled by staff in my Department as part of their normal duties.

Local Authorities (Auditing)

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will introduce measures to improve the internal audit procedures in Scottish local authorities. [50872]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 22 July 1998]:* Internal audit is a fundamental element of the financial and management controls which local authorities are responsible for having in place. As part of their routing regulatory work, the external auditors of local authorities assess the quality of the internal audit against set CIPFA standards. Where the auditors identify weaknesses in the council's internal audit process, they will recommend action, either to council officials or members depending on the nature of the shortcoming. Any recommendations made by the auditors are checked to ensure that they have been fulfilled. Where they are not, and if there is something fundamentally wrong, the auditor can choose to report this to the Controller of Audit, which might lead to a Special Report being made to the Secretary of State.

Prisoners (Suicide and Self-harm)

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the ratio of the number of suicides to inmates, in each of the last three years, *(a)* per gender and *(b)* in total; what discussions he has had with the Home Office concerning the prevention of suicides in prisons; and if he will make a statement. [51743]

Mr. McLeish: The information requested is as follows.

	Average daily number of prisoners (including young offenders)			*Number of Suicides*			*Ratio of the number of suicides to prisoners*		
Year April-March	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
1994–95	5,449	181	5,630	16	—	16	1:340	—	1:351
1995–96	5,458	174	5,632	5	3	8	1:1092	1:58	1:704
1996–97	5,803	189	5,992	14	3	17	1:415	1:63	1:352
1997–98	5,873	186	6,059	12	1	13	1:489	1:186	1:466

Consultation between my officials in the Scottish Prison Service and Home Office officials have taken place and the Task Force which has been set up to consider the circumstances surrounding recent deaths include a member from the Suicide Awareness Support Unit in HM Prison Service for England and Wales.

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what procedures are in place which allow families of inmates to alert prison authorities to a risk of suicide; and if he will make a statement. [51661]

Mr. McLeish: If the family of a prisoner has reason to believe that a relative in prison is at risk, they can let the prison know by telephoning, writing or speaking to a member of management or staff. A poster and leaflet campaign will shortly be undertaken to encourage this. The Scottish Prison Service has also made available in court buildings a "Risk Identification" form which a prisoner's family can complete and which will accompany the prisoner to the prison concerned.

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many (i) suicides and (ii) incidents of self harm have occurred *(a)* in each prison and *(b)* in total, in each of the last five years broken down by age and gender; and how many of the people concerned were (1) on suicide observation and (2) on remand. [51732]

Mr. McLeish: The information requested on suicides for April to March years, is as follows:

Establishments	*1993–94 Ages*	*1994–95 Ages*	*1995–96 Ages*	*1996–97 Ages*	*1997–98 Ages*
Aberdeen	28	—	—	'25	'30
				35	
Barlinnie	'23	23	'36	'25	54
		50		22	'25
		'43		'24	'28
		'26		25	
		'25		19	
		24			
Cornton Vale	—	—	'17	19	24
			'17	'26	
			'26	22	
Edinburgh	'45	'20	—	—	47
Glenochil	—	—	—	—	27
Greenock	'39	'26	'22	58	46
		'21	20	'45	35
				'29	'30
				38	
Longriggend	—	'19	'20	'20	'17
		'20			
Perth	28	34	33	'21	47
	28	29		27	
		24			
		25			
		46			
Polmont	21	—	—	—	18
Total	7 (3 remands) (Includes 2 prisoners on hourly observations)	16 (8 remands) (Includes 1 prisoner on hourly observations)	8 (6 remands) (No prisoners on observations)	17 (8 remands) (No prisoner on observations)	13 (5 remands) (Includes 3 prisoners on hourly observations)

Those prisoners who were on remand

Note:

All prisoners and young offenders are male with the exception of these at Cornton Vale.

No self harm figures are available, due to difficulties of definition.

Prison Costs

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the average annual cost of a prison place *(a)* in each category of prison and *(b)* in total. [51740]

Mr. McLeish: The budgeted average annual cost of a prison place in Scotland, for the current financial year (March 1998 to April 1999) is *(a)* £23,575 for secure prisons, £16,959 for open prisons and *(b)* £23,156 in total. These have been calculated as total budgeted expenditure (excluding capital, Headquarters, the SPS Training College and other central costs) divided by the forecast prisoner places available in the year, at the time when the budgets were set.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *336*, if he will list the name of each of Scotland's Lord-Lieutenant and the dates each was appointed. [52011]

Mr. McLeish: The names of Scotland's Lord-Lieutenants and the dates each was appointed are as follows. Lord-Lieutenants may serve until their 75th birthday.

Lieutenancy area	*Lord-Lieutenant*	*Date appointed*
Aberdeenshire	Captain Colin A. Farquharson FRICS	13 May 1987
Angus	The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Airlie KT GCVO PC LLD	18 October 1989
Argyll and Bute	His Grace The Duke of Argyll	6 February 1996
Ayrshire and Arran	Major Richard Y. Henderson TD	5 April 1991
Banffshire	James A. S. McPherson Esq. CBE	11 August 1987
Berwickshire	Major General Sir John Swinton KCVO OBE	20 September 1989
Caithness	Major Graham T. Dunnett TD	22 January 1996
Clackmannan	Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Stewart CBE TD	15 December 1994
Dumfries	Captain Ronald C. Cunningham-Jardine	21 October 1991
Dunbartonshire	Brigadier Donald D. G. Hardie TD	2 June 1990
East Lothian	Sir Hew Fleetwood Hamilton-Dalrymple Bt KCVO	20 January 1987
Fife	The Earl of Elgin and Kincardine KT	4 November 1987
Inverness	The Rt. Hon. The Lord Gray of Contin PC	3 October 1996
Kincardineshire	The Viscount of Arbuthnott KT CBE DSC FRSE	8 February 1977
Lanarkshire	Hutchison B. Sneddon Esq. CBE	9 June 1992
Midlothian	Captain George W. Burnet LVO	31 January 1992
Moray	Air Vice Marshal George A. Chesworth CB OBE DFC	12 March 1994

Lieutenancy area	*Lord-Lieutenant*	*Date appointed*
Nairn	The Earl of Leven and Melville	22 July 1969
Orkney	George R. Marwick Esq.	1 April 1997
Perth and Kinross	Sir B. H. David Montgomery Bt	3 March 1995
Renfrewshire	Cameron H. Parker Esq. OBE	25 May 1998
Ross and Cromarty	Captain Roderick W. K. Stirling of Fairbairn TD	16 May 1988
Roxburgh, Ettrick and Lauderdale	His Grace The Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry KT VRD	[1]10 June 1974 and [2]16 March 1975
Shetland	John H. Scott Esq.	28 February 1994
Stirling and Falkirk	Lieutenant Colonel James Stirling of Garden CBE TD FRICS	15 December 1983
Sutherland	Major General David Houston CBE	24 November 1991
The Stewartry of Kirkcudbright	Lieutenant-General Sir J. Norman S. Arthur KCB	22 January 1996
Tweeddale	Captain J. David B. Younger	18 June 1994
West Lothian	The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Morton	31 July 1985
Western Isles	The Viscount Dunrossil CMG	7 December 1993
Wigtown	Major Edward S. Orr Ewing	12 October 1989

[1] Appointed as Lord-Lieutenant for Roxburgh
[2] Appointed as Lord-Lieutenant for Selkirk
(Subsumed as lieutenancy of Roxburgh, Ettrick and Lauderdale at local government reorganisation in May 1975)

In addition, the Lord Provosts of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow are by virtue of their office Lord-Lieutenants for those cities. The relevant details are:

City	*Lord-Lieutenant*	*Date appointed*
Aberdeen City	Mrs. Margaret B. Farquhar	1 April 1996
Dundee City	Mervyn J. Rolf Esq. FRSA FSAScot	1 April 1996
City of Edinburgh	Eric Milligan Esq.	1 April 1996
Glasgow City	Pat Lally Esq. HRGI FRSA	1 April 1996

Forestry

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to the consultation paper, Opportunity for Change, when he will be seeking views on how forestry can contribute to sustainable development. [52123]

Mr. Macdonald: We have published a supplementary consultation paper called "The Sustainable Management of Forests", and copies are available in the Library. Comments are invited on how forestry can contribute to sustainable development, and these should be sent to the Forestry Commission before 11 September.

Classroom Assistants

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his policy for the creation of classroom assistants, indicating *(a)* the total amount of money made available for this purpose, *(b)* when the jobs will begin, *(c)* how such classroom assistants will be recruited, *(d)* what qualifications will be required and *(e)* the proposed rate of pay. [52121]

Mr. Wilson: I announced our plans for a major expansion in the employment of classroom assistants in primary schools on 14 July as part of our strategy for raising standards in schools. We are committed to achieving a ratio of one adult to every 15 pupils in the primary school system by 2002 and will employ up to 5,000 new classroom assistants to achieve this.

In the light of the decisions taken following the Comprehensive Spending Review this programme will receive funding of £66 million over 3 years from the Excellence Fund which will provide education authorities with assistance targeted on a series of measures, including this: £10 million will be available for assistants in 1999–2000, £20 million in 2000–01 and £36 million in 2001–02.

We would expect recruitment under the initiative to begin as soon as the new resources become available in April 1999 and as is practical, and for the numbers of assistants to grow as more funds become available each year. Local authorities have also been invited to participate in a pilot programme commencing in August this year. There will therefore be a small number of assistants recruited during 1998–99; and a number of authorities already employ some assistants.

Local authorities will be responsible for designing jobs, recruiting classroom assistants and providing training within general guidance which will be considered by a Scottish Office working group involving authorities, teachers, training providers and others. Recruitment methods will not be prescribed. The initiative will, however, provide opportunities for people from local communities.

Any entry requirements for classroom assistants' posts will be for local authorities to determine. However, the working group will consider what guidance should be given and will promote the development of relevant training, leading towards a qualification for classroom assistants.

Local authorities will also be responsible for determining rates of pay and other contractual conditions such as hours worked, in line with the nature of the posts created and local labour market conditions.

DEFENCE

Naval Manning Agency

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Naval Manning Agency for 1998–99. [45616]

Dr. Reid: The Chief Executive of the Naval Manning Agency has been set the following key targets for 1998–1999:

1. Greater than 94% of officer billets to be filled.
2. Greater than 89% of Naval Rating billets to be filled.

3. Greater than 88% of Royal Marine Other Ranks billets to be filled.

4. Total strength of Naval personnel to be within plus 1% to minus 2% of the set requirement.

5. Greater than 60% of officers to receive more than 4 months notice for change of employment.

6. Greater than 98% of Ratings/Other Ranks to receive more than the specified notice for change of employment.

7. Greater than 99% of Ratings/Other Ranks to receive the specified levels of Minimum Time Ashore.

8. To achieve a progressive annual 7.5% reduction in the number of manpower gaps within the scope of the Agency's control.

9. To conduct two benchmarking exercises per year.

10. To produce full accruals-based accounts.

11. To operate the Naval Manning Agency within its 1998–99 cash allocation (expressed at 1997–98 prices) of £9.8 million, a reduction of £0.6 million (6%) from the 1997–98 figures.

Atomic Weapons Establishment, Aldermaston

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantity of radioactive liquid in gallons has been discharged from AWE, Aldermaston into the River Thames in each year since 1980; and if he will make a statement. [51158]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* Liquid discharges from AWE, Aldermaston to the Thames are of treated effluent or trade waste of extremely low radioactivity content. All such discharges are made within the limits set by discharge authorisations from the appropriate regulatory body, most recently the Environment Agency, under the terms of the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 and Part V of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Limits are set at values which are well below those which would cause environmental impact or significant public risk and are subject to periodic review. In fact, it has been calculated that in a year the radiation dose from AWE's liquid discharges into the Thames via the Pangbourne pipeline to the most exposed individual is the same as that one would receive from eating half a brazil nut.

Discharges from AWE Aldermaston to the River Thames since 1980 are as follows:

Year	*Discharge/gallons*
1980	4,983,000
1981	3,696,000
1982	4,125,000
1983	3,498,000
1984	3,498,000
1985	3,366,000
1986	3,399,000
1987	3,315,000
1988	3,135,000
1989	3,036,000
1990	2,771,120
1991	2,970,000
1992	2,739,000
1993	2,309,340
1994	2,233,660
1995	1,698,180
1996	1,353,000
1997	1,566,840
1998 (to end June)	1,273,360

Details of discharges are published annually in AWE's Environment Safety and Health Report.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the metallurgy division at the Atomic Weapons Establishment, Aldermaston, was set up; what is the purpose of this division; how many series of technical papers or reports are currently being produced by this division; and what are the names of each series. [51130]

Mr. Spellar: The Metallurgy Division of the Atomic Weapons Establishment, Aldermaston was set up in 1995. It is now part of the Metallic Materials business area in the Technology Division. Among its purposes are research and development on a range of fissile, toxic and conventional metals, production of certain components in support of research and development, and work supporting the stockpile stewardship of the UK's nuclear deterrent.

One series of technical papers and reports is currently produced by the Metallic Materials business area, namely Director Technology Technical Reports.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *569*, on AWE, Aldermaston if he will place a list of the titles of the 25 reports produced by the Weapon Diagnostic Division of the Atomic Weapons Establishment in the Library, indicating the date on which each paper was produced. [51136]

Mr. Spellar: I am today placing a list in the Library of the House.

Land Contamination

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the compensation claim by Blue Circle International for contamination of their land adjacent to AWE, Aldermaston. [52159]

Mr. Spellar: Following an exceptionally severe storm in July 1989 water bearing low level radioactive material from ponds situated at AWE, Aldermaston overflowed onto adjacent marshland belonging to Blue Circle Industries plc. The company later sought damages for economic loss from the collapse of negotiations related to a possible sale of the Blue Circle Industries estate. The High Court awarded damages of some £6 million against the MOD.

On legal advice, the MOD appealed against this ruling. The Appeal was heard in May and judgment handed down on 10 June with the Court finding for Blue Circle Industries plc and increasing the award by a further £600,000.

As agreed by both sides, there was no physical damage to human or animal health, and the area affected was well away from land regularly used by the company or to which the public had access. The affected sediment was removed at MOD's expense in 1994 by suitable qualified contractors to the satisfaction of the regulatory Authorities and Blue Circle Industries.

European Fighter Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will commission a study on a naval variant of the European Fighter Aircraft. [51868]

Mr. Spellar: I have nothing to add to the answer given to my hon. Friend on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *433*.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the different types of aircraft able to use the Royal Navy's new aircraft carriers; and if he will assess the potential for using the Eurofighter aircraft on the carriers. [52111]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to him on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *433*, and to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *478*.

Stockholdings

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* market and *(b)* book value of stockholdings which his Department intends to dispose of over the next three years. [50956]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 17 July 1998]:* The SDR has set out a Departmental target to dispose of holdings of non munitions stores with a book value of £2.2 billion over the next three years.

The market value of these essentially surplus and obsolescent items will amount to only a small fraction of this figure. Receipts from the sales of equipment, spares and munitions over the last three years have amounted to some £80 million per annum. This level is expected to be maintained over the next four years.

Plutonium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to paragraph 72 of the Strategic Defence Review, Cm. 3999, what were the reactors of origin of the 7.6 tonnes of defence plutonium; and if he will list its isotopic composition. [51418]

Mr. Spellar: The reactors of origin for the bulk of the stock of 7.6 tonnes of plutonium are Windscale Piles, Calder Hall and Chapelcross. We have announced, as part of the Strategic Defence Review, our intention to produce by Spring 2000 our initial report of Defence fissile material production since the start of our defence nuclear programme in the 1940s. It would be contrary to national defence and security interests to reveal the isotopic composition of this plutonium and this information is therefore being withheld under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Sir Lanka (Arms Sales)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the value to the United Kingdom of arms sales to Sri Lanka in each year since 1990. [51799]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence is currently working with the FCO and the DTI to prepare the Government's first Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls. The Report will include details of export licence applications for UK Military List items and details of such equipment exported with annual values. When the Report has been issued I will write to my hon. Friend in regard to the information requested for previous years.

C-130

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 29 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *10*, if compensation in excess of the £30 million will be sought for further delays in the delivery of the C-130. [51869]

Mr. Spellar: Liquidated damages will continue to be collected as they fall due. Final amounts will depend on the actual dates of deliveries, and could exceed £30 million.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the sub strategic role for Trident submarines; and if he will make a statement. [51893]

Mr. George Robertson: The credibility of our minimum nuclear deterrent requires that we have the option, in extreme self-defence, of deterring further aggression through a nuclear ("sub-strategic") strike which is limited in scale and nature of target so that it could not be expected automatically to lead to a full scale nuclear exchange.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals have been put to the NATO Council of Ministers for a no first use policy on the deployment of nuclear weapons. [51954]

Mr. George Robertson: No such proposals have been made to the NATO Council of Ministers.

Armoured Personnel Carrier Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress his Department has made on the Mobility 1, Protection 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Project. [51074]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* The programme for a Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle with a high level of mobility and protection is now known as the Armoured Battlegroup Support Vehicle programme. Studies into this requirement are in progress, looking particularly at possible commonality with the future replacement for the Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle, and assessing the operational effectiveness and value for money of using the same components in a number of different vehicles.

Joint Strike Fighter

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money has been spent by the United Kingdom on the Joint Strike Fighter to date. [51062]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* Payments made by the UK Government to the US Department of Defense under the Concept Demonstration Phase of the Joint Strike Fighter programme amount so far to approximately £55m.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals he has for the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. [51070]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* We have said in the White Paper on the Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999) that we will harness the opportunities offered by Public Private Partnership to strengthen the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's ability to continue to provide world class scientific research well into the next century.

We are keen to involve all the stakeholders in taking forward our plans and in deciding on the best practical means of achieving our objectives. We shall, therefore, be consulting widely with industry, DERA management and staff representatives, the scientific community and our key Allies before reaching decisions.

Armed Forces

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *424*, what proportion of the number of people who will have had some experience in the forces will be under the age of 35 years in 2015 and will have had experience in the Army. [52124]

Dr. Reid: It is not possible to make an exact calculation, but as, at present, the majority of personnel serving in the Armed Forces are under 35 years of age and, as the majority of those who leave the Forces are under 35, it would be reasonable to assume that a large proportion of those people who will have had some experience of the Armed Forces will also be under 35 years of age in 2015.

Boeing C-17 Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many *(a)* UK aerospace companies and *(b)* other UK companies, would directly benefit from the leasing or purchase of the Boeing C-17 aircraft; [52069]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of jobs which would be generated from the purchase or lease of the Boeing C-17 aircraft in the UK. [52070]

Mr. Spellar: Bids will be invited to meet the short-term and long-term air transport requirements in parallel competitions. Requests for proposals will be issued later this summer for the long-term requirement, and in the Autumn for the short-term requirement. In both cases, I can assure my hon. Friend that the procurement decision will take account of employment, industrial and all other relevant factors.

Challenger 2 Battle Tank

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of Vickers production of the Challenger 2 battle tank. [52112]

Mr. Spellar: Vickers Defence Systems are contracted to provide the Ministry of Defence with 386 main battle tanks, together with associated training equipment, spares and ammunition. Under the delivery schedule, all 386 main battle tanks are to be delivered by February 2002. The company has concluded two export contracts with the Royal Army of Oman, and the Ministry of Defence will continue to provide the normal support in pursuing export prospects.

Europe-wide Defence and Aerospace Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's role in discussions relating to the creation of a unified Europe-wide defence and aerospace company. [52122]

Mr. Spellar: It is for the companies themselves to determine the future structure of the European aerospace and defence industry. Government's role is to facilitate the process. With this objective, the Ministers of Defence of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden signed on 6 July a Letter of Intent which sets out an approach to removing a number of practical obstacles to restructuring in a number of areas.

Heavy Lift Capability

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to ensure that the tender specifications for the competition for the near term requirement for an outsized cargo heavy lift capability will allow as many potential bidders as possible to tender for the contract. [52123]

Mr. Spellar: The competition for the short-term strategic airlift requirement will be conducted under normal procurement rules which require that all competitions are as open as possible. The competition will give industry the opportunity to put forward their proposals. A notice was included in the MOD Contract Bulletin on 15 July, and I expect a range of potential bidders to express their interest as requested, before the end of August.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on United Kingdom heavy lift capacity. [49636]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 9 July 1998]:* We have decided to enhance our strategic lift capacity by both air and sea. As was explained in the Supporting Essay Six on Future Military Capabilities, which was published on 8 July in conjunction with the Strategic Defence Review White Paper (Cmnd 3999), we have concluded that we cannot at present deploy Joint Rapid Reaction Forces quickly enough to meet operational requirements in the changed strategic environment. Nor is commercial shipping or airlift likely to be available in sufficient quantities to meet rapid deployment deadlines, although it will have an important place in transporting follow-on forces.

We have therefore decided that the most effective alternative in military and resource terms is: to acquire four additional roll-on roll-off container ships to join the two now entering service (it may be possible to do so using Public Private Partnership); in the short term, to meet our strategic airlift needs with four C-17 aircraft or their equivalent; and in the longer term, we need to consider a suitable replacement for our remaining elderly transport aircraft, for which the proposed European Future Large Aircraft is a contender.

Bids will be invited to meet the short-term and long-term air transport requirements in parallel competitions. Requests for proposals will be issued later this year, and we would hope to make decisions on procurement by early 2000.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many letters per day his office receives; how many staff are employed to answer these; what targets are set in respect of such letters; and what is the current performance against targets. [50684]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 27 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *180*, if he will list in respect of *(a)* AWE Aldermaston, *(b)* Rosyth dockyard and *(c)* Devonport dockyard the quantities of all radioactive materials held on site which are not defined as low-level waste or intermediate-level wastes, giving the forms in which such material is held. [51226]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 20 July 1998]:* No high level waste is held at any of the sites.

AWE, Aldermaston holds approximately 960 cubic metres of very low level waste comprising soil contaminated with plutonium removed from around Aldermaston Court and the Pangbourne pipeline valve pits. Devonport Dockyard currently holds approximately 20 cubic metres of very low level waste, made up of protective clothing, material and equipment contaminated with activation products, principally cobalt 60. Rosyth Dockyard currently holds no very low level waste.

Rosyth Dockyard currently hold spent fuel equivalent to one submarine reactor core and Devonport Dockyard one and three-quarters submarine reactor cores of spent fuel. In accordance with IAEA and Euratom definitions, spent fuel is not categorised as waste while reprocessing remains an option. The decision as to whether this and other spent fuel owned by the Department is to be reprocessed remains open.

Two decommissioned submarines, HMS Valiant at Devonport and HMS Renown at Rosyth, still contain spent fuel. Plans are in place to remove this fuel at the earliest operational programmed opportunity. HMS Repulse which was referred to in the reply I gave the hon. Member on 27 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *180*, has now been defuelled and the spent fuel transferred to BNFL Sellafield.

TRACER Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the TRACER project. [51250]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on 8 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *529*.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to her answer of 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *405*, on parliamentary questions, for what reasons the text of the answer to Q25826 was not *(a)* printed in the relevant *Hansard* daily part and *(b)* delivered to the office of the right hon. Member for Wokingham. [52235]

Mrs. Beckett: An envelope containing the written answers given by my Department on Tuesday 3 February was delivered to the *Hansard* office during the afternoon and they were printed by *Hansard* in the daily part for Wednesday 4 February, columns 607–611. The answer to Q25826 was omitted due to an oversight by *Hansard*.

In accordance with normal and long-standing practice, envelopes, containing the answers addressed to relevant hon. Members, including one envelope addressed to the right hon. Gentleman, were delivered by a member of staff from parliamentary branch to the letter board in the Members' Lobby.

Drinks (Ministerial Offices)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much has been spent on the provision of drinks in ministerial offices at her Department since 1 May 1997. [25826]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 28 January 1998]:* As at 27 January, the cost of drinks purchased by the seven Ministers' offices since 1 May was some £4,000. The figure for the equivalent period the previous year was some £4,400.

Employment Agencies

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on progress in her review of the rules governing the conduct of employment agencies. [51642]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We aim to publish a consultation document seeking views on updated regulations to govern employment agency conduct in early autumn.

Grants and Awards (Wakefield)

Yvette Cooper: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the grants and awards that require bids from applicants which her Department is responsible for administering and awarding *(a)* nationally and *(b)* that people and groups within Wakefield Metropolitan District are eligible to bid for; if she will publish the deadlines for these applications; and if she will produce this list on a regular basis. [51272]

Mrs. Roche: There is a range and diversity of grants and awards, both departmental and through EU funding, which are available via Government. All Wakefield constituents are entitled to make application for these awards where appropriate.

I understand that officials from the Department supplied some constituency-based information for my hon. Friend recently. The information requested is not, however, held centrally or in the form requested, and to

collate such a list would involve disproportionate cost. However, general information on grants available to the public can be obtained from local business links.

Sombrero Island

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade for what reasons the environmental impact assessment on Sombrero Island was not carried out during the bird nesting season. [51256]

Mr. Battle: Beal Aerospace is proposing to develop a rocket launch site on Sombrero island, which is part of the UK overseas territory of Anguilla. Beal Aerospace has contracted an environmental consultancy—ICF Kaiser—to perform an environmental impact assessment on the proposal. It is for Beal Aerospace to decide when and how the assessment should be conducted. The relevant authorities will then consider the adequacy of the assessment when it is submitted.

I understand that ICF Kaiser is aware that its initial ecological survey conducted earlier this year did not coincide with the nesting season of many of the birds on Sombrero, and is expected to visit the island again this month to carry out further studies when more birds will be nesting.

Export Licence Applications

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many export licence applications awaiting decisions on 24 June had been waiting for *(a)* 20 days, *(b)* 40 days, *(c)* 60 days and *(d)* more than 60 days. [48228]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* At 24 June 1998, a decision had not yet been taken on 2,110 applications for new individual export licences received since 2 May 1997. These are broken down as follows:

	Standard individual export licences	*Open individual export licences*
Applications received between		
2 May 1997 and 26 March 1998	449	140
27 March 1998 and 27 April 1998	230	27
28 April 1998 and 27 May 1998	417	16
28 May 1998 and 24 June 1998	817	14

The figures for open individual export licences do not cover amendments, extensions or OIELs for protective clothing for the media.

However, this information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) of 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *256–58*.

Multilateral Agreement on Investment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what recent consultations she has had with local authorities on the negotiations regarding the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. [50759]

Mrs. Roche: Officials from this Department, HM Treasury, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, have met the Local Government Association's international bureau, and my noble Friend the Minister for Trade has exchanged correspondence with them as well as with many local authorities. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment recently addressed the LGA's environment and regeneration board, and discussed the multilateral agreement on investment. In addition, there have been numerous letters to Ministers from local authorities, as well as letters and other informal contacts with officials. Our view is that no current lawful local government practice will be affected by the MAI.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has commissioned on the impact of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment on *(a)* restrictive trade practices and *(b)* consumers in the United Kingdom. [50760]

Mrs. Roche: We have not commissioned any such research.

The UK already has an open and liberal economy, and has benefited greatly from the inward investment we have attracted as a result. If the multilateral agreement on investment increases inward investment even further, we would expect this to lead to increased competition and hence benefits for consumers. The UK and EU regulatory framework for competition policy exists to deal with anti-competitive behaviour.

HEALTH

Chlamydia

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for a public education programme on the precautions necessary to exclude chlamydia infection. [42118]

Ms Jowell: The Department already commissions health promotion work for sexually transmitted infections including Chlamydia and has recently funded leaflets and radio advertising. We are currently considering further measures to increase public awareness of Chlamydia.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has initiated into the effects of chlamydia infection. [42117]

Ms Jowell: I recently announced that the Department will be setting up two pilot studies to test the feasibility of opportunistic screening for chlamydial infection later this year. In addition, the National Health Service health technology assessment programme will shortly be issuing a call for research proposals on topics identified by expert advisers as needing further work.

Ovarian Cancer

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the results of the Intergroup Study with Taxol-cisplatin and the national Ovarian Cancer Chemotherapy Consensus Statement; and if he will make a statement. [51659]

Mr. Boateng: Some clinical trials on the place of "Taxol" (Paclitaxel) in the treatment of ovarian cancer have already reported results but others are still underway. An updated analysis of the survival benefit of using Taxol

in combination as a first line treatment of advanced ovarian cancer was considered earlier this year by clinicians who issued the national Ovarian Cancer Chemotherapy Consensus Statement. A full presentation of the analysis was made in May at the meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. These have undergone close scrutiny by the profession.

Early indications are that these results are encouraging and we have asked the Trent Development and Evaluation Committee to review their earlier work on the use of Cisplatin and Paclitaxel as a first line treatment in ovarian cancer in the light of these new data. This is being considered by the Standing Medical Advisory Committee alongside guidelines being prepared by the Joint Council for Clinical Oncology and following that, advice will be issued to the National Health Service.

Haemophiliacs

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of the United Kingdom haemophilia population receiving NHS treatment before 1986 were infected with HIV; and what plans his Department has to make financial assistance available to those who were infected with hepatitis C. [51621]

Mr. Boateng: Around 1,200 members of the United Kingdom haemophilia population were infected with HIV as a result of National Health Service treatment before 1986.

We have received a number of representations on the issue of special payments for haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C through NHS treatment. The issues involved are complex and we are exploring them fully before reaching a decision.

Psychiatric Units (Secure Beds)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the current waiting times for persons who need a secure bed in a psychiatric unit in England; [51753]

(2) what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of secure beds available in psychiatric units in England; [51751]

(3) how many secure beds are available in psychiatric units in England; [51752]

(4) how many of the secure beds available in psychiatric units in England are currently occupied. [51750]

Mr. Boateng: In 1992 the Department carried out a "Review of Health and Social Services for Mentally Disordered Offenders and Others Requiring a Similar Service". This recognised that the provision of secure places is an important part of the strategy to meet the needs of mentally disordered offenders, and gave added impetus to the Glancy report (1974) which proposed a target of 1,000 medium secure places nationally.

Between 1991 and 1995 the Department invested over £47 million in a capital programme with the aim of developing 1,250 purpose-built medium secure places in the National Health Service. The programme is now almost complete and the target of 1,000 places nationally has been met. This programme has also been supported by the NHS regions.

Currently there are 1,504 medium secure places and 1,070 low secure places in England, making a total of 2,574 beds. This does not include the high security hospitals. Information on the number of places occupied and on waiting times for secure beds is not available centrally.

Mesothelioma

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* conducted and *(b)* evaluated into the causes of mesothelioma; how much his Department has spent on researching mesothelioma in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [51899]

Mr. Boateng: The main agency through which the Government support bio-medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council (MRC). The MRC is an independent body which receives its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology, which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry. The MRC has not supported any research, in the last five years, specifically to evaluate the causes of mesothelioma. However, it does provide support for more basic research in related areas which may provide insights into the aetiology of mesothelioma and have an impact on treatment in the future. For example, the MRC Toxicology Unit at Leicester has been working on projects to better understand the cellular mechanisms by which the lung responds to certain toxic materials. These include many toxins that circulate throughout the body and yet cause selective injury to particular types of lung cell, as well as inhaled mineral fibres such as asbestos and zeolites.

In addition, the MRC's Committee on Toxic Hazards in the Environment and Workplace produced a report in 1995 (ISBN 1 899110 03 8) entitled "Natural and man-made mineral fibres: UK research priorities"—this was based on workshops organised by the Institute for Environmental Health. This report considers, *inter alia*, mesothelioma. It is available from the Institute of Environment and Health, University of Leicester, PO Box 138, Lancaster Road, Leicester LE1 9HN (telephone 0116 252 5530 or fax 0116 252 5146).

Medicines Commission

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to receive the Annual report of the Medicines Commission for 1997. [52820]

Ms Jowell: We have received the report, and copies have been laid before both Houses of Parliament today in accordance with the requirements of section 5(2) of the Medicines Act 1968.

Bound volumes have been placed in the Library containing the 1997 reports of the Medicines Commission, the Committee on Safety of Medicines, the Advisory Board on the registration of Homeopathic Products, the British Pharmacopoeia Commission and the Veterinary Products Committee.

We are glad to acknowledge the valuable work done by the distinguished members of the Medicines Act Advisory Bodies and thank them for the time and effort dedicated in the public interest to this important work.

Community Health Councils

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will take steps to allow community health councils to represent those residents of nursing homes who are not funded by the NHS. [52240]

Ms Jowell: Community health councils' role is to represent the interests in the health service of the public (including the residents of nursing homes whether or not they are funded by the National Health Service) in their districts. We have no plans to extend community health councils' role to represent the public's interest in non NHS funded services or care.

Child Migrants

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will open to public scrutiny the documents *(a)* 1406, 1948 to 1957, Emigration of 100 children to Fairbridge Farm School, Piryarra, Western Australia: reports on inspection of premises, 894024/28, *(b)* 1557, 1947, Information about Fairbridge Farm School, Western Australia, given to Home Office by a former worker, 903435/18 and *(c)* 1592, 1947 to 1949, Emigration of British children to Northcote Farm School in Australia: details of organisation of school, 904404/2 held in the Public Record Office. [52272]

Mr. Boateng: The three files referred to are all subject to closure for 75 years because they contain personal and confidential references to individual children. This is consistent with Government policy concerning all public records. In the light of this policy, and in the context of the Health Select Committee's concerns, we are considering again whether these three files and some others can be opened. Hon. Members, bona fide researchers, representatives of the Child Migrants Trust, or the sending agencies for child migration, including Fairbridge, or individual former child migrants, may see these files subject to a condition preserving the confidentiality of the personal information in them. Arrangements can be made with Departmental officials.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

People's Panel

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *362*, if he will estimate the cost of the second wave of research planned for later in the year. [52234]

Dr. David Clark: The cost of the second wave of research using the People's Panel is not yet known. It will depend on the number of issues that are covered and how many other Departments take part.

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio on what date the air-conditioning system for the Millennium Dome is planned to be installed. [49153]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 July 1998]:* Installation of the air cooling system has already begun in line with the critical path for delivery of the project in time for 1 January 2000.

Millennium Dome (Transport)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) how many park-and-ride car parking spaces will be provided for the Millennium Dome; [47822]

(2) what plans the Government have to offer park-and-sail facilities to the Millennium Dome; [47787]

(3) what plans he has to discourage the use of private cars by visitors to the Dome; [47812]

(4) where the park-and-ride car parks for the Millennium Dome will be located. [47786]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 29 June 1998]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has recently produced a detailed park-and-ride strategy for Greenwich Council as part of its planning requirement. This document, which gives full and detailed answers to the questions raised, has been placed in the Library of the House.

CABINET OFFICE

Lobbyists

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what communications have been sent to GPC Market Access through his Ministerial fax machine. [52255]

Mr. Mandelson: My office sends numerous faxes every day to different individuals and organisations and a record of these is not kept.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what is his policy on *(a)* receiving representations from lobbying companies, *(b)* initiating meetings with lobbying companies and *(c)* passing on representations made by lobbying companies. [51969]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* Ministers receive deputations and representations from many groups who are concerned to press their own interests or those of their clients which Ministers take due care to consider within the wider public interest and Government policy. All contacts with outside interest groups are conducted in accordance with the principles set out in the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Code.

Official Travel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio when he last travelled by train on official business. [51970]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* I travelled from London to Newport and back by train on 10 July.

Freedom of Information White Paper

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what is the nature of the representations he has made in respect of the proposed Freedom of Information White Paper. [51968]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answers given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *1* and 20 July 1998, *Official Report* column *362*.

Overseas Visits

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the overseas visits he has undertaken at public expense since 1 January, indicating the purpose of each visit. [51974]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* I have undertaken the following official visits since 1 January 1998:

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
1998		
2–5 January	Florida and Washington	Official programme, including meetings at Epcot and the White House
30 January-1 February	Florence	Speech to European University Institute in UK Presidency series of lectures
2–3 February	Brussels	Official programme, including discussions with the European Commission, MEPs and the UK Permanent Representation
2–4 March	Bonn	Official Programme, including speech to seminar on European Integration and National Sovereignty
8–9 May	Hague	Speech to Congress of Europe 50th Anniversary on behalf of the UK Presidency
8–9 June	Paris	Speech to Seminar at National Assembly on Blair-Jospin: One Year On
18–22 July	Brazil	Official programme, including meeting with President Cardoso and speeches at University of Brasilia and British Chamber of Commerce, Sao Paulo

Ministerial Speeches

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the speeches he has made since 1 May, indicating their dates and audience; and if he will place copies in the Library. [51971]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* I undertake numerous speaking engagements and address many different groups in the course of my ministerial duties.

TREASURY

BCCI Report

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the confidential sections of the Bingham report into the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International; and when he proposes to publish these clauses. [43079]

Mr. Darling: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 23 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *649*.

Working Families Tax Credit

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to ensure the adaptability of the Working Families Tax Credit to recipients' changing circumstances. [50580]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The broad outline of the Working Families Tax Credit was published on Budget day and the Inland Revenue is continuing to work on the precise details of the scheme.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the details of the operation of the Working Families Tax Credit will be published; and if he will make a statement. [50579]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The broad outline of the Working Families Tax Credit was published on Budget day in "The Working Families Tax Credit and work incentives"—number 3 in the series "The Modernisation of Britain's Tax and Benefit System". We intend to bring forward the necessary legislation to implement it in detail as soon as possible.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how soon after moving into work parents will start to receive the Working Families Tax Credit. [50581]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: As the Chancellor announced in his Budget, the effective and efficient delivery of the tax credits will be key indicators of its success, and the Inland Revenue expects to maintain the current high standards of service seen in the speed of delivery of Family Credit.

Local Authority Assets

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 11 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1195–1201, if he will make a statement on the process by which he will achieve the annual sale of £2.75 billion of local authority assets. [50834]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* It will be the responsibility of individual authorities to determine and deliver their asset disposal plans. But from 1 September 1998 they will also have the added incentive that they will be able to spend more of the proceeds, as the Government will no longer require to set aside a percentage of the proceeds from sales, other than sales of council housing and associated land.

National Asset Register

Mr. Charles Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 11 June 1998,

Official Report, columns 1195–1201, if he will list the central Government disposals from the National Asset Register which he plans for 1998–99 in order to achieve £1 billion revenue. [50835]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 16 July 1998]:* The estimates for 1998–99 were set out in the FSBR. The estimate of £1 billion a year over the next 3 years is projected from the level of sales achieved in previous years, the enhanced incentives announced at the time of the National Asset Register for Departments to dispose of assets, and discussions with Departments in the Comprehensive Spending Review on prospects for sales in the next 3 years.

National Parliaments

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Treasury will enter into public service agreements with *(a)* the National Assembly for Wales and *(b)* the Scottish Parliament. [51464]

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has agreed Public Service Agreements with the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales. Once formally established it will be for the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament to determine what arrangements they want to introduce to ensure that public expenditure on devolved services represents best value for money.

Income Tax

Kate Hoey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people are currently paying *(a)* schedule C and *(b)* schedule D tax. [51653]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Schedule C was abolished for income tax purposes from 6 April 1996. The tax charge was transferred to Schedule D from that date.

It is estimated that about 21 million individual taxpayers have income taxable under Schedule D or Schedule A.

Gas-powered Vehicles

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will reduce duty on auto-LP gas to the European Union minimum of 6.8/kg for a period of not less than five years; and if he will make a statement. [51857]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: There are no plans to reduce the duty rate on gas used as road fuel to the EU minimum.

The freezing of the rate since November 1996 represents a reduction in real terms which, taken in conjunction with increases in duties on other fuels, recognises the environmental benefits associated with road fuel gases.

The widened duty differential with conventional fuels offers a clear incentive for high mileage fleets, vans and buses to convert to cleaner gas power and will help offset the cost to motorists of vehicle conversion.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what environmental requirements will be built into the public service agreements between the Treasury and other Government departments; and if he will make a statement. [51975]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* The Government are committed to taking the environment into account across all areas of policy. Public Service agreements between the Treasury and other Government Departments will be consistent with the objective of sustainable development. Where relevant, specific environmental objectives will be reflected in the aims and targets in the agreements.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his announcement on the Comprehensive Spending Review, on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, if he will publish a table listing expenditure on science, research and development for each Government department and the total for *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02. [51846]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 23 July 1998]:* Figures of Government Departments' plans for expenditure in 1998–99 on science, engineering and technology and on research and development are published in Tables 2.1 and 3.1 respectively of 'Science, engineering and technology statistics 1998'(Cm 4006 Department of Trade and Industry and Office of Science and Technology). Copies are available in the Library of the House. Provisional figures for the following three years will be available later this year.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the purpose of his most recent visit to the United States; what was the total cost to public funds; and how many people, holding what posts, accompanied him. [51885]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I travelled to the United States last week to give a speech setting out Government policy on economic reform in the UK, Europe and in the world economy. All arrangements for the visit were fully in line with the Ministerial Code.

Ernst and Young

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the Ernst and Young ITEM Club forecast of growth for 1999 of one per cent. [52236]

Mrs. Liddell: The Treasury regularly monitors a wide range of independent forecasts for the UK economy. Based on the published July comparison, the Ernst and Young ITEM Club forecast for growth in 1999 is now the third most pessimistic out of the forty-five organisations surveyed by the Treasury. The Budget projections for the public finances are based on a forecast for growth of $1\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. in 1999 which, by contrast, is very much in line with the independent consensus.

Life Offices

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Government's policy on the inherited estates of life offices. [52749]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government's position on the inherited estates of life offices was set out in a statement by the then Minister for Corporate Affairs in February 1995. The DTI, which was then the responsible regulatory authority, applied the principles set out in that statement in reaching agreement with four life offices for a restructuring of their long-term funds, and a clarification of the attribution of the interests of policyholders and shareholders in the long-term fund.

A common feature of these cases is that they involved a particular type of business known as "industrial business". Historically, there was a lack of clarity over the development of these companies' approach to dealing with surplus arising in respect of some industrial business policies written earlier this century. Consequently, there was no clear evidence as to how surplus which had built up from these policies should be properly attributed between policyholders and shareholders. The DTI therefore reached agreement with the companies on an attribution based on reasonable assumptions, in line with the February 1995 statement.

In considering any other proposals for clarification on unattributed assets, the Treasury will continue to be guided by the principles set out in the DTI statement of February 1995, and apply them to the particular circumstances of each case. In doing so, the Treasury will be particularly concerned to ensure that policyholders' interests are fully protected.

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Rulings and Statements by Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker's rulings and statements'.

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The date of each item except Parliamentary Questions is inserted immediately before the reference.

Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions.*

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Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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